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Neurodivergent Perceptions, Experiences, and Perspectives in Academic Biological Sciences Spaces

Brooke M. Fitzwater¹, Alexandra G. Tissot[†], Noah R. Bressman[‡], Christofer A. Brothers[§], Yuchen Chen[¶], Tara J. Cronin^{||}, Nicole S. Desjardins[#], Sonja Huč^{**}, Jacquelyn R. Galvez^{††}, Caitlin S. Gillespie^{‡‡§§§§}, Chloe Kaelin^{§§}, Sarah A. Knutie^{¶¶|||}, Jess Marquardt^{##***}, Rut Martínez-Miras^{†††}, Ulrike K. Müller^{|||‡‡}, Andrew K. Schulz^{§§§}, Benjamin Shanafelt^{¶¶¶}, Sierra L. Sowa^{|||||}, Chris O. Spear^{###}, Ariel Steele^{****}, Ryan Thompson^{††††}, Megan R. Wyatt^{|||‡‡‡} and Taormina Lepore^{##}

*Department of Biological Sciences, The University of Alabama, Honors Hall, Box 870344, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487, USA;

†Department of Environmental Science and Management, Portland State University, 1719 SW 10th Ave, SRTC Building,

Room 218, Portland, OR 97201, USA; ‡Department of Biological Sciences, Salisbury University, 1101 Camden Avenue,

Salisbury, MD 21801, USA; §Department of Neurobiology, Physiology, and Behavior, University of California, Davis, 1

Shields Avenue, Davis, CA 95616, USA; ¶Department of Biology, Duke University, 130 Science Drive, Durham, NC 27708,

USA; ||Department of Biological Sciences, Clemson University, 132 Long Hall, Clemson, SC 29634, USA; #Department of

Entomology, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1630 Linden Dr., Madison, WI 53706, USA; **Department of Biology and

Marine Biology, University of North Carolina Wilmington, 601 S. College Rd., Wilmington, NC 28403, USA; ††Department

of Integrative Biology, University of California Berkeley, 110 Sproul Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA; ‡‡Max Planck Institute

for Biological Intelligence, Munich, Germany; §§Department of Evolution and Ecology, University of California, Davis, 1

Shields Avenue, Davis, CA 95616, USA; ¶¶Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, University of Connecticut,

Storrs, CT 06269, USA; ||||Institute of Genomics, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT 06269, USA; ##Mallinson Institute

for Science Education, Western Michigan University, 1908 W. Michigan Ave, Kalamazoo, MI 49008, USA; ***Department

of Biology, James Madison University, 951 Carrier Drive, Harrisonburg, VA 22807, USA; †††Max Planck Institute for

Intelligent Systems, Stuttgart 70569, Germany; ‡‡‡Department of Biology, California State University Fresno, 2555 E San

Ramon Ave, Fresno, CA 93740, USA; §§§Haptic Intelligence Department, Max Planck Institute for Intelligence Systems,

Stuttgart 70569, Germany; ¶¶¶Special Education Department, Mercer Island High School, 9100 SE 42nd St, Mercer Island,

WA 98040, USA; |||||Department of Biology, San Francisco State University, 1600 Holloway Avenue, San Francisco, CA

94132, USA; ***Department of Integrative Biology, The University of Chicago, 5801 S Ellis Ave, Chicago, IL 60637, USA;

****Lyman Briggs College, Michigan State University, 919 E Shaw Lane, East Lansing, MI 48825, USA; ††††Department of

Biology, Skidmore College, 815 N Broadway, Saratoga Springs, NY 12866, USA; ‡‡‡‡Department of Ecology and Evolution,

Stony Brook University, 100 Nicolls Road, Stony Brook, NY 11794, USA; §§§§Present address: Institute for Stroke and

Dementia Research (ISD) University Hospital, LMU Munich Feodor-Lynen-Straße 17, Munich 81377, Germany

All authors minus the first, second, and last author are listed in alphabetical order. B.M.F., A.G.T., and T. L. were the lead author team.

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¹E-mail: bfitzwater@crimson.ua.edu

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Abstract Neurodiversity has received considerable attention recently from the general population and academic researchers, coinciding with an increase in formal adult diagnoses and individuals self-identifying as neurodivergent. Many neurodivergent individuals, particularly academic trainees, have reported adverse experiences while participating in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields, citing a lack of support and resources. Further, academic systems are based in a history of ableism which assumes and reinforces normative ways of productivity, speaking, and being within academic spaces. It is thus imperative that the field of biology moves toward more inclusive practices that rethink how to fully support and invest in neurodivergent members of the field, which generate a diversity of thought necessary to promote scientific discovery, and deserve full equity and inclusion in our field. During the Society for Integrative and Comparative Biology 2026 meeting in Portland, OR, USA, neurodivergent scientists of all levels (from undergraduate to tenured professors) met to discuss their experiences as neurodivergent researchers. We share our roundtable reflections here, conceptualized as neurodivergent perceptions and perspectives. We also offer strategies and resources for neurodivergent individuals to navigate academic spaces, and also suggestions for departments, instructors, advisors to create more inclusive classrooms and lab spaces.

Introduction

Neurodiversity, an umbrella term used to refer to numerous conditions or identities (e.g., autism spectrum disorder [ASD/autism], attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder [ADHD], obsessive compulsive disorder [OCD], and others) that result in divergent ways of neurological function and processing, has garnered increased attention, both from the general public and the scientific community (Cobbeart *et al.* 2024; Kroll *et al.* 2024). This increased attention on neurodiversity coincides with a recent rise in adult diagnoses for autism and ADHD and corresponding neurodivergent self-awareness in Western society (Russell *et al.* 2022; Abdelnour *et al.* 2022). Many individuals who were diagnosed later in life slipped through the diagnostic cracks due to a variety of reasons, including “masking” their symptoms in order to fit into society (Miller *et al.* 2021; Van Der Putten *et al.* 2024). Additionally, the lack of understanding regarding how autism, ADHD, and other neurodivergent identities interact and manifest in gender and racial minorities has led to misdiagnoses, underdiagnoses, no diagnoses, later in life diagnoses, and/or little to no assistance (American Psychiatric Association 2013; Eckerd 2020; Katz *et al.* 2020; Cassidy *et al.* 2023; Craddock 2024; Abdulle 2025). Despite recent advancements in the clinical and personal understandings of many neurodivergent identities, there are still disparities with regards to understanding how neurodivergent identities manifest in marginalized and intersectional communities (Cenat *et al.* 2021). Additionally, there is still a lack of access to diagnoses, particularly due to cost, long wait times, stigma associated with a diagnosis, and the continued lack of understanding of neurodivergent identities and how they manifest in marginalized groups (Fletcher-Watson 2024; Maciever *et al.* 2025). These factors lead many to self-diagnose, which can still lead to positive mental health outcomes and self-advocacy (Friedman *et al.* 2024). As the rate of diagnoses and

expressions of neurodivergent self-awareness continue to rise, greater neurodivergent self-advocacy and institutional support is also necessary in order to provide safer, more inclusive personal and professional spaces.

As biological fields evolve toward greater diversity and inclusivity, it is critical that we acknowledge and accommodate neurodivergent workers in the field and adopt more neurodivergent-friendly practices in our academic circles. This is particularly important for early career trainees regardless of neurodivergent identity, as students are more likely to leave research programs after negative experiences or when they feel excluded (Cooper *et al.* 2019). Many members of neurodivergent STEM communities report negative experiences during their academic training (Gin *et al.* 2022). Neurodivergent graduate students have disclosed high cognitive loads associated with fitting in with their peers, maintaining productivity, strain in their advisor–advisee relationships, and poor mental health during their training (Syharat *et al.* 2023). In addition, neurodivergent faculty members also reported hardships within academic spaces; however, these hardships have received less attention in the literature (Katari and Erickson 2025). Overall, the aforementioned negative experiences and hardships increase the likelihood of individuals leaving academic fields, resulting in the loss of diversity of thought and talent (Maher *et al.* 2020; Graham *et al.* 2023).

To combat this loss of diversity and talent, there is a need for primary literature exploring the narratives of specific experiences of neurodivergent academics in biology, especially from graduate student, postdoctoral researcher, and faculty perspectives (see also Bressman *et al.* 2026 in this special issue). While much work has focused broadly on STEM in general or in specific STEM fields such as geosciences (Stokes *et al.* 2019), as few as 10% of these studies focus on biology spaces (Borrego *et al.* 2025).

Theoretical framework

Neurodivergent and other disabled identities are often investigated in the literature by using the medical (or individual) model of disability framework, which is a deficit-based framework that centers neurodivergence and disabilities as causing impairment on the individual's life (Marks 1997; Gray et al. 2025). Instead, we take an intersectional and Critical Disability Theory approach that acknowledges the various factors that informed the lived experiences of an individual. This approach does not center the neurodivergent or disabled person as the burden, but acknowledges that human neurotypes and experiences naturally vary along a spectrum (Botha et al. 2025), and that disability can be a result of societal barriers, in line with the social model of disability (Oliver 2023). The intersectional lens was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) to explain the multiply-marginalized identities of Black women, and the framework has been further used to explore and understand how multiple marginalized identities can compound to inform an individual's experiences within society, even legally. Critical Disability Theory states that social, cultural, and political structures can impair neurodivergent and disabled people, rather than the burden being solely on the neurodivergent or disabled person (Gillies 2014). Together, these lenses allow us to more holistically assess and explore our own identities and experiences in biological and academic spaces.

Roundtable methods and qualitative, emancipatory research perspectives

In this work, we discuss navigating academic spaces in the biological sciences as neurodivergent individuals. Discussions were held in-person at the Society for Integrative and Comparative Biology (SICB) 2026 meeting as part of the symposium “Disabled and Neurodivergent Perception, Community, and Identity in the Biosciences,” as well as correspondence through email after the symposium. The in-person discussion took the form of a “roundtable” where authors were invited to reflect upon and share their experiences with other neurodivergent SICB attendees in the physical room space. Authors were later allowed to add responses or alter their previous responses through a shared online document which was shared to all authors via email correspondence. We also allowed those who were interested in participating but who were not able to attend in person the opportunity to also add their own discussion prompt responses to be more accommodating. This manuscript serves as an edited transcript of both the in-person and electronic discussions. All authors self-identify as neurodivergent, and we include individuals with official di-

agnoses as well as self-diagnosed individuals. Diagnosis can be prohibitively inaccessible, whether due to cost, wait-times, misdiagnosis, or limited access to a licensed professional (Lewis 2017; Senter et al. 2021). Additionally, diagnostic criteria such as the *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders fifth edition* (“DSM-V”) has improved and changed over time to be more inclusive (American Psychiatric Association 2013). Adults who were previously not diagnosed as children because they did not meet earlier diagnostic criteria have now been able to obtain diagnoses and treatment as adults (Fusar-Poli et al. 2022). Additionally, there is evidence to support that self-screening tools can have high accuracy (Brevik et al. 2020; Sturm et al. 2024). Taken together, we support neurodivergent self-identification.

Our aim with this roundtable discussion is to highlight the experiences of neurodivergent scientists in order to inform both the broader biological sciences community and provide other neurodivergent biologists with resources and strategies to improve their overall experience. Because we center neurodivergent voices in written and spoken format, we echo qualitative methods and emancipatory research perspectives. We have chosen not to conduct qualitative thematic analysis of the roundtable discussion since we are not conducting a research study. Instead, the roundtable serves as a platform for naming our identities and sharing our experiences and perspectives. This is in line with other roundtable perspective papers presented in this journal (e.g., Orr et al. 2020; Sharpe et al. 2023; Josefson et al. 2024) and was originally conceived due to author B.M.F.'s previous participation in this paper format. Our primary theoretical frameworks are Critical Disability Theory and intersectionality. However, aspects of qualitative research and emancipatory research perspectives informed our desire to share our experiences together, centering the voices and community cultural wealth of disabled and neurodivergent people who are typically not recognized or prioritized within academic discourse (Yosso 2005; Dolmage 2017; Tancredi et al. 2025).

Emancipatory and participatory research perspectives knit together with critical race theory, critical disability theory, cultures of power, neurodivergent-affirming perspectives, and decolonial frameworks to center our voices and identities in this fashion, uplifting marginalized and intersectional disabled/neurodivergent voices in bioscience (see, French and Swain 1997; Yosso 2005; McIntyre 2007; Smith and Millsbaugh 2015; Delpit 2018; Srinivasan et al. 2025). In particular, when led by neurodivergent people, neurodivergent-affirming approaches can highlight and disrupt systems of ableist power, placing the onus of change on the system rather than the neurodiver-

gent individual (Srinivasan et al. 2025; Tancredi et al. 2025). Because of the exclusionary and gatekept nature of academia, academic publishing, and conferences (Dolmage 2017), the voices and experiences of some non-academics, non-college-educated people, non-verbal disabled people, some people with intellectual disabilities, non-literate people, and others may not be prioritized. We take a page from Donna Haraway's (2013) feminist theory of partial perspective, wherein we reject the neutral and traditional academic voice, even while we perform within it. Our positionality reflects what Haraway calls "partial perspectives," where our webbed accounts provide individual and sometimes contradictory perspectives, even while we share aspects of "disability" and/or "neurodivergence" (Haraway 2013). Importantly, we allowed authors to discuss their personal experiences as neurodivergent biologists, both the positive and the negative. Authors were required to respond to two prompts minimum but were allowed to respond to whichever prompts they chose.

Readers may find some of the content shared in this roundtable upsetting, and we want to give a content warning that bullying and sexual and physical assault are mentioned in a response to the "As a neurodivergent scientist, how has the field of biology and academia in general made it more difficult for you to operate in academic spaces?" prompt. This is an important topic to address, but we want to alert readers in advance in case this content would be triggering to them. Finally, we have provided a summary of key points for each of the prompts (found in the Supplementary Materials of this manuscript) to allow readers to access the main discussion points since we acknowledge that this is a longer manuscript. We also provide key takeaways and recommendations at the end of the manuscript ("Key Recommendations and Our Neurodivergent Lens" section) to provide readers with meaningful steps to create more inclusive and equitable biology spaces.

Artificial intelligence statement

The application Otter.AI was used on a Samsung Galaxy S24 FE to transcribe the in-person conversation as an accessibility aid for B.M.F. The only functions used for this manuscript were the transcribing feature, and B.M.F. incorporated all text that was caught by the app into the manuscript and edited for clarity, and all authors were given the chance to also edit their own statements for additional clarity. No artificial intelligence summaries or other generative artificial intelligence functions were used as part of the application or on this manuscript.

Positionality and limitations

The purpose of this roundtable discussion was to name and claim ourselves as neurodivergent biologists. Our identities have informed our lived experiences as both scientists and as people. It is also important to us that we acknowledge our own limitations and biases that may have influenced our responses. It is not possible to explore all of the experiences that neurodivergent biologists may have since neurodivergent identities lie on a spectrum and may also intersect with other identities to inform lived experiences (Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Dlott 2025). Neurodivergent experiences are not a monolith, neither for neurodivergent biologists nor neurodivergent individuals broadly, and the experiences and perspectives shared herein are only representative of the neurodivergent biologist authors in this roundtable discussion rather than universal experiences of all neurodivergent individuals. We did our best to include as many voices as possible and publicly advertised our in-person roundtable discussion for SICB 2026 as allowing any neurodivergent biologists to attend regardless of academic stage, but ultimately it is not possible to include all voices who need to be heard.

Through our positionality statements, we wish to emphasize that it is possible to be a neurodivergent biologist. We also want to acknowledge that some of the strategies presented in this roundtable may not be appropriate to everyone's specific needs and experiences. For example, therapy can be a useful tool for learning to cope and accept one's self, but it may not be accessible to all neurodivergent biologists or may even be harmful if the therapist is not neurodivergent-informed (Jones et al. 2025). Additionally, while many authors discuss their neurodivergent identity and experiences in relation to their own curiosity, creativity, interest in interdisciplinary science, and the like, we are not causally linking these traits with being neurodivergent. Rather, each author or even neurodivergent readers may experience their own neurodivergent identity through the lenses of creativity and curiosity for example, but we are not indicating that these are biological traits of all neurodivergent individuals (i.e., "essentialism" philosophy, see Phillips 2010; Lebrón-Cruz and Orvell 2023). We also acknowledge that neurodivergent people may have differing language preferences. Person-first language is common in the literature and is used by some neurodivergent individuals; however, some prefer to use identity-first language (Janiszewski et al. 2025). Each author in this roundtable discussion was welcome to use whichever language felt most affirming to them, including the specific terminology that they used to refer to their neurodivergent identity, even if that terminology is considered "outdated" by the community or the

literature. For the positionality statements, authors were only required to disclose their academic stage, affiliation, and that they were neurodivergent (not their specific neurodivergent identity), and they were given guidance that they could disclose as much or as little as they felt comfortable with, in order to protect author identities. Finally, we acknowledge that many of our authors are white, college-educated biologists in the USA who have remained in science fields, which likely created a survivorship bias within our responses.

Below, we state our positionalities.

B. Fitzwater: (she/her) is a recent PhD graduate who was a first generation college student and identifies as a white cisgendered queer woman. She has interests in sexual selection, reproductive behavior, and host–parasite interactions, particularly in marine settings. She was formally diagnosed autistic and with unspecified anxiety disorder in 2024 as an adult and a year prior to graduating with her PhD.

N. Bressman: (he/him) is an assistant professor of physiology who identifies as a white cisgendered man. His research areas are diverse, including amphibious fish behavioral ecology and biomechanics, aquatic invasive species management, and functional morphology of extremophile fishes. He was diagnosed with ADHD as a child. As a professor, he was recently diagnosed with general anxiety disorder (GAD) and may have other undiagnosed neurodivergent conditions.

C. Brothers (he/him) is a PhD Candidate at UC Davis and identifies as a multi-racial cisgendered man. His academic focus is in animal behavior with an emphasis on behavioral ecology, ecomorphology, and comparative methods, especially in crustaceans and dragonflies. He was diagnosed with ADHD in 2022 as a PhD student.

Y. Chen (she/her) is an undergraduate student at Duke. She identifies as an Asian cisgendered queer woman. Her current research focuses on social behavior and communication. She has been diagnosed with ADHD since childhood.

T. Cronin: (she/her) is a PhD Candidate who is a first generation PhD student and identifies as a queer woman who is white. Her primary research interest involves behavior, particularly behavior in relation to symbiotic relationships. She has conducted research in a wide variety of fields including paleontology, mitochondrial genomics, community ecology, physiology, behavioral parasitology, and modeling. She was diagnosed with ADHD, along with major depressive disorder (MDD), seasonal affective disorder (SAD), complex post-traumatic stress disorder/post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD/PTSD), GAD, and other undisclosed conditions.

N. DesJardins: (she/her) is a postdoctoral fellow who identifies as a white cisgendered woman. Her research

focuses on insect ecology and physiology and seeks solutions to protect pollinators from anthropogenic stressors. She was diagnosed with autism as an adult while pursuing her PhD and has experienced depression, anxiety, and OCD at times throughout her life.

J. Galvez: (she/her) is a PhD candidate who identifies as a Latina cisgendered woman. She is an ichthyologist and ecologist interested in understanding human impacts upon morphological evolution in fishes. Her dissertation research uses geometric morphometrics to understand shape variation in endangered steelhead trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) living in a dam-impacted river system. She has experienced persistent anxiety and periods of dissociation throughout her adult life, and was diagnosed with OCD in 2022 as a graduate student.

C.S. Gillespie: (she/they) is a research assistant and soon-to-be PhD candidate who identifies as a white, cisgendered queer woman. Their current role deals with connectomics, specifically collection and analysis of the zebra finch (*Taeniopygia guttata*) connectome. Her PhD focus will be on translatable research for neurodegenerative disease. She is a first-generation university graduate from a disadvantaged socio-economic background. As a teenager she was diagnosed with GAD and MDD and struggled with disordered eating. As a graduate student she was diagnosed with ADHD (inattentive).

S. Huč: (she/her) is a PhD student of Integrative, Comparative, and Marine Biology at the University of North Carolina Wilmington who identifies as a white cisgendered woman. She is from Slovenia, but grew up and went to school both there and in the USA. She holds a Master's degree in Marine Biology. Her academic interests lie in marine invertebrate phylogenetics, taxonomy, and genomics. She is also passionate about teaching and art science communication. She has been diagnosed with ADHD.

C. Kaelin: (she/her) is an undergraduate evolutionary biologist who is white and was diagnosed with ADHD at 8-year old. She studies fish functional morphology in her undergraduate lab and is a tutor, which has led to growing interest in teaching. She comes from a privileged background and hopes to explore ways of teaching level the playing field while continuing evolutionary research.

S. Knutie (she/her) is an associate professor and disease ecologist in the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Connecticut. She is a first generation college student and identifies as a white, cisgendered, queer woman. She was also diagnosed with ADHD later in life (39-year old) in 2023, and since then, has been vocal about her experience with this diagnosis in academia.

R. Martínez-Miras: (she/her) is a PhD student from Spain, and identifies as a white, cisgendered queer

woman. Her research interests include morphological intelligence, mechanics and robotics. She is also passionate about combining art and science. She has experienced anxiety and depression throughout her life; as a graduate student, she was formally diagnosed as autistic, and also later with ADHD.

J. Marquardt: (she/they) is a PhD student in science education as well as being a senior lecturer of biology at a primarily undergraduate university in the south mid-Atlantic region of the USA. She is a reproductive physiologist by training and her current research focuses on equitable teaching practices in STEM. They identify as 40+, white, queer, nonbinary, and neurodivergent. They come from a socioeconomically disadvantaged background in a conservative rural midwestern area.

U. Müller: (they/them) is a full professor who identifies as a white non-binary person. They were diagnosed with autism when they were a full professor and likely have additional undiagnosed neurodivergent conditions. They have been treated for depression and PTSD as a highschooler and a post-doc. They come from a socioeconomically disadvantaged background, are the first in their family to graduate from college, and are an English-additional-language writer and immigrant. Their research focuses on biomechanics, specifically bio-fluid dynamics.

A. Schulz: (he/him) is a postdoctoral researcher who identifies as a white cisgendered man. His research looks at the biomaterials and biomechanics in diverse animal species to design robotic, sensing, and health technologies. He was diagnosed with ADHD in 2015 as an undergraduate student. In graduate school he was also diagnosed with ASD, GAD, and MDD. He has also experienced disordered eating and occasionally dissociation during his life.

B. Shanafelt: (he/him) is a marine biologist and High School Special Education provider. His biological experience is in fisheries and marine biology, and his academic experience stems from a MS in Marine Biology and a MAT in Teaching. He is formally diagnosed with ADHD, and struggles with several (undiagnosed) and by choice unspecified challenges. His thoughts here blend his perspectives as a researcher, student, and educator.

S. Sowa: (they/she/he/any) is a Master's Student at San Francisco State University graduating and defending in the spring of 2026. They identify as white, queer, and non-binary and have been diagnosed with GAD and pre-menstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD) and have been treated for symptoms of depression since childhood. Their immediate family has a history of neurodivergence including ADHD, ASD, depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder (BD). They have an interest in ecol-

ogy, evolution, and climate change specifically in avian and amphibian systems.

C. Spear: (they/them) is a PhD candidate of Integrative Biology at the University of Chicago. They identify as white, transgender, agender, queer, disabled, and neurodiverse. Their research interests are in neurobiology, comparative anatomy and physiology, and biomechanics.

A. Steele: (she/her) is a teaching assistant professor of biology who identifies as a white, cisgender woman. She is also a first-generation college student. Her research interests on equity in STEM education were motivated by her own experiences in biology, and she explores a variety of topics in biology graduate and undergraduate education, including imposter phenomenon, mentoring, and science identity. She was diagnosed with ADHD and GAD as an adult during her postdoc, and identifies as autistic.

A. Tissot: (she/they) is an ecotoxicologist who identifies as a white, genderqueer woman. Her preference for identify-first language depends on the disability (i.e., person with ADHD vs. autistic). She was diagnosed with PMDD, and ADHD during her PhD, and has a number of additional invisible disabilities. She was assessed for autism as an adult and identifies as autistic. Her research focuses on the effects of pesticides in the environment and is passionate about environmental justice and disability advocacy in the toxicology field. She was raised in a rural community and is a second-generation scientist.

R. Thompson: (they/them) is an undergraduate biologist who identifies as a white, non-binary, lesbian diagnosed with Tourette's, OCD, ADHD, and anxiety. Their neurodivergence has both helped and hindered their career path as a future herpetologist.

M. Wyatt: (she/her) is a PhD candidate who is a first generation college graduate and identifies as a white, heterosexual, and cisgendered woman. Her research uses vertebrate morphology to investigate how changing terrestrial environments shape trait evolution and diversification in extant and extinct vertebrates. She was diagnosed with GAD while applying to graduate school and was diagnosed with ADHD several years later as a PhD candidate.

T. Lepore: (she/they) is an insider researcher as a disabled and neurodivergent person, and tends to prefer identity-first language. She identifies with having shifting low vision throughout her life due to retinopathy of prematurity, and came to identify with Autistic-ADHD identities as an adult, while having long identified with agoraphobia and panic disorder. She is a paleontologist by training and a postdoctoral researcher in science education equity at a medium-sized Midwestern US research university, 40+, white, first-generation to

college, queer, non-binary, and femme, from a suburban middle-class upbringing with strong cultural roots and practices.

Being neurodivergent in biology: the successes, and the struggles

Many neurodivergent individuals express both positive and negative self-perceptions and experiences in response to their neurodivergent identity. Here, we focus on our neurodivergent identities as they pertain to our participation in the field of biological sciences.

How has your neurodivergent identity informed the way that you think about and conduct your science?

T. Cronin: Personally, I believe my neurodivergent identity has had a positive and unique impact on the way I think about and conduct science. One aspect that I often attribute to my ADHD, is the broad number of topics that I explore which is often driven by whatever catches my interest at the time. This has led me to have a relatively broad knowledge base which has changed how I think about science, by allowing me to examine questions from unique angles as well as providing me with keen attention to details. Ultimately, my neurodivergent identity is a large reason why I have been able to conduct research in different fields of biology and why I have been able to persist in STEM, despite the challenges neurodivergent individuals face. However, I will note it is often hard for me to realize these things all the time, as I frequently feel like an imposter in academia, although I'm told this is normal.

N. Bressman: I'm very open with the students in my lab about my neurodivergence, telling them that I take an ADHD approach to my lab's research curriculum in that my interests are very broad. Basically, I'll research whatever I'm interested in at that time, which is a lot of things. Like, "Ooh, I want to research this. Now I want to do that, and that, and that!" Because my interests are really broad, I kind of consider myself more of a jack-of-all-trades, rather than a master-of-one. So, when people ask me what kind of research I do, I say that I do functional morphology, biomechanics, invasive species, fisheries, sensory biology, behavior, policy, now some psychology, and a lot more because I like to do all these different things. This also allows me to have a student-driven research program that prioritizes the projects the individual students want to do, rather than projects that align with a strict theme, because chances are whatever the student is interested in researching, I am probably also interested in learning more about that topic. This strategy works really well as a faculty member at a pri-

marily undergraduate institution where my primary responsibility is teaching, followed by research. We don't have PhD students and I don't have much time to individually run experiments, so I don't often plan out big, multi-year projects that require extensive grant funding. Instead, I do a lot more small projects funded by small grants over shorter durations with undergraduate researchers and a couple of master's students. In a very ADHD fashion, this allows me to bounce around with my lab's research curriculum to study all these different subjects that I want to engage with, which helps maintain my interest and enthusiasm in research while encouraging students to pursue their own research interests.

A. Tissot: More than anything, my constant sense of curiosity is a huge part of how I approach science. I sincerely feel that curiosity and passion are key traits in a scientist. I also feel that the "jack of all trades" quality that many neurodivergent folks have is *very* useful. Going through my doctoral program, it was seen both as a positive and negative trait, since I would be familiar with a lot of different areas, but not necessarily have deep expertise in one particular subject; however, I feel that my neurodivergence allows me to be an expert on many different topics. As a toxicologist and ecologist, I feel this is immensely useful and important in terms of working to protect the environment. I am able to think more holistically about my work, which is more representative of the reality that the environment is facing. In conducting my science, the *biggest* lesson I learned was to accommodate myself, and ignore the inner (and societal) critiques telling me that I was being ridiculous. Going at a slower rate allows me to feel more confident in my work, and using many different tools to allow for the dynamic changes in my needs was a huge step.

U. Müller: I'm a professor at Fresno State, and I was diagnosed with autism just a few years ago. What stands out to me with hindsight about my academic career is my ability to hyperfocus. When I was a PhD student, I had no idea that that was something unusual. I studied fish larvae, visualizing the flows that they generate. I would sit in a dark room with my thumb on a trigger of the high speed camera for hours on end, staring at the computer screen, waiting for the fish to swim through the field of view. I did this for many weeks, and on a good day I might record a handful of scenes, on a bad day I would spend ten hours with my thumb on the camera trigger and nothing to show for it. As a PI, I assigned a similar project to my students, only one of them could do it, another neurodivergent student, the rest simply got too frustrated. At the time, I just thought "but there is nothing to it, you just have to sit there and wait, no real skill required." Now I know that one of the things that I can do is I can do really boring things and not get

bored. Because of that skill, I was able to collect some unique data sets (e.g., Müller and van Leeuwen 2004), and these data sets have been used a lot since then in other studies, as evident in the large number of citations, many for the detailed data on swimming kinematics that informed computational studies (e.g., Li *et al* 2012).

C.S. Gillespie: I think my identity changes the way I approach science fundamentally. Due to my struggles with concentration and constant anxiety, reading papers or listening to talks can sometimes trigger a large anxiety spike in me. For example, if I feel I don't understand something in the paper/talk, I instantly start feeling out of place and that I don't belong in this sphere (though this could also come from my non-traditional background being so unlike the majority of my academic peers). Due to this intense first-hand experience that I have very often, I strive to make anything I work on clear and communicable as possible. So much of the language used in academia obfuscates and mystifies rather than conveys. This feels like a large barrier at times, not only to me as a neurodivergent person who struggles with vague definitions or using different descriptions of the same process/idea in the same paper/talk, but to the general audience. I constantly apply metaphors/similes to give abstract concepts a tangible feel, because otherwise I won't grasp them myself. This sometimes comes across as childish/less "professional"—but it is simply another way of learning.

Further, I think the way my brain works enables me to have different perspectives and ideas that my neurotypical colleagues would not—that is, "thinking outside of the box." Applying existing tools in new non-traditional ways to achieve results otherwise not possible, even if it is considered "unconventional," so long as it is safe. Interdisciplinary work seems like common sense to me rather than an innovative idea, as it seems to appear sometimes, and I am baffled by the academic urge to "stay in your lane." As a neuroscientist, I see constantly how our brains and our bodies are influenced by so many different factors across fields, subjects, specialisms. Why would a question or problem with this complex system only be possibly solved by one method/theory? I think it is the traditional inflexibility of some schools of thought that I find myself unable to align with, and this makes my approach different to some of my peers. Though sometimes I worry this means I am less committed or confident, I am trying to come to terms with the idea that this allows me to be more open to new hypotheses and overall good science.

R. Thompson: I'm very neurodivergent, extremely ADD, and I love science. One of the most significant symptoms of ADD is executive functioning problems, which has really shaped how I conduct research, that is

very different from the ways that a lot of other people in my field do it. It can be difficult to rewrite things and make them work for me. It's hard when other people in my field look down on me because they think I'm unprofessional or appear unorganized. They think I'm not trying or don't care, which is very disheartening and far from the truth. Sometimes, you know, having ADD can make someone very distractible and have several different passions. And sometimes, when my colleagues in science see that, they think, "Oh, that's not a scientist, that's an artist." You know, which is incredibly limiting. Can you not be both? I've had professors tell me that I should be an artist, *not* a biologist. Which is hard for me, because I think it's important that the sciences incorporate different perspectives, and preserve creative thought. My neurodivergence makes me an incredibly creative person. Sadly, many do not see the need for creativity in the sciences. Research in many ways can be "by the book," which limits novelty. A goal of mine is to preserve my neurodivergent identity in academic spaces by doing things for myself, not for the purposes of checking the boxes of academia. I want to use my neurodivergence to come up with novel research ideas that go against the norm of what is currently understood about the subjects that I am passionate about.

B. Fitzwater: I am observant and have always collected facts and data about the world around me. Becoming a scientist felt natural to me because I felt like I perceived the world like one since childhood. I enjoy chipping away at a subject and finding out how it works. My increased sensory needs also make me more aware of the environment, which allows me to perceive more information about my study system. I am also a person who is naturally very detail-oriented, and this has been a strength in my research because I collect a lot of data. I want to preface, however, that I do not see my autism as a "superpower"—an ideology that can be harmful to many neurodivergent individuals. Instead, I approach my autistic traits as sometimes assisting me with my science and sometimes causing me to struggle with the system as it currently operates. I do acknowledge, however, that even among the authors in this roundtable, there is a diversity of thought and for some, thinking of your neurodivergent strengths as "superpowers" can be helpful. Also briefly bouncing off R. Thompson, I have also had people hint or suggest that I become a science artist or full-time science communicator despite the intensity and passion with which I have conducted my research. My dissertation was five (almost six) chapters. I earned over \$20,000 in grants to conduct fieldwork in three separate locations. It is a frustrating pattern that I have observed where neurodivergent biologists are ignored for their research capacity. I deeply value science, art and outreach/communication and will always produce

them. However, it is particularly frustrating when people see those skills or misperceive your neurodivergent identity and thus shove you into a small box to define what you “should” do. This is especially true for those of us who joined the field because we were passionate about research and the scientific process.

T. Lepore: My neurodivergent identity, especially the ADHD component, has really influenced the way I think about and conduct my science. I’ll give the example of my dissertation and a number of other things I’ve done throughout my career. So, in my career, I have two master’s degrees, and I kind of hop around to different topics in a way that I chase things that excite me and sometimes that can make me feel like a multifaceted hybrid person, that it can be a little bit hard to fit into one box. I’ve done work in paleontology, in STEM education. I was a high school teacher. However, rather than feeling ashamed or like I, you know, should fit into only one box? I really feel empowered and like I have a diverse set of skills that allow me to navigate multiple different fields and ways of thinking. And I think that’s an asset. And so I think my neurodivergent identity has helped me bring a lot of self kindness into the work that I do, and embracing that diversity of thinking.

C. Spear: I experience my neurodiversity as having both pros and cons. I’ve always described my brain as connecting thoughts and ideas similar to how a spider web connects many strings at the same intersection. For me, what may feel like a natural connection of a thought can come across as a confusing or random connection to someone else. In my research, I combine neurobiology, biomechanics, and anatomy and physiology. In my mind, in order to fully explain a behavior or movement that I see in a living organism, each category plays an important role. This has led me to include more variables and take a wider approach to research. On the downside, by trying to take such a deep dive into so many different areas to be thorough and to fill in my knowledge gaps, my progress can sometimes be slower. Additionally, by trying to cast such a wide net to answer a seemingly simple question, I often feel like I’m not the expert on anything. This makes me take even deeper dives into the literature which, again, can slow my own progress. However, at the end of the day, I feel like my results are very thorough because I’ve gone down multiple avenues and addressed many different aspects.

Y. Chen: My neurodivergent identity definitely shapes how I think about science. I am always observing the world around me at any time, paying attention to all kinds of interactions that many people rarely notice or seldom care about. I felt this ability has definitely led part of my research interests in animal social behavior and my passion of figuring out how sociality forms and evolves.

A. Steele: My neurodivergence has definitely informed my experiences as a scientist over the course of my career, both in a positive and negative way. I was officially diagnosed with ADHD as a postdoc, but suspected ADHD while finishing my PhD. I love science and learning as much as possible about whatever I happen to be interested in at the time, but I found myself getting frustrated with how much bouncing around I would do on my favorite topics, and the seemingly endless list of unfinished projects because I would get distracted on something new. While this was really frustrating for me as I was trying to finish my PhD, I learned to embrace my meandering mind and work with it instead of against it. I spent so much time in graduate school trying to force myself into a box of what a “normal” scientist was, that I crashed and burned, pivoting into a field I love and finding myself fitting into more. I love coming up with new ideas and deep diving into something I find interesting, which helps a ton with grant writing. I am also really great at diving into a data set and getting lost in the finer details, but then zooming out to see what the bigger picture is. Sometimes, I can get really overwhelmed with everything, because I have so many ideas and thoughts that it can be really challenging to stick with one thing and see it all of the way through. Nothing has ever been simple for me, but I’ve learned it does not need to be, because what’s the fun in simple?

S. Knutie: When I was first diagnosed with ADHD, I described it as both a superpower and kryptonite. My ADHD brain can elevate my success but also create major roadblocks. When my superpower is engaged, I am creative, inspired, and I can write for hours on end. The introduction of my “kryptonite” is unpredictable and can leave me unproductive for days, weeks, or even months. Please note that many of my answers below have been also addressed in [Brouillard \(2024\)](#) and [Knutie et al. \(2025\)](#).

As a neurodivergent scientist, how has the field of biology and academia in general made it more difficult for you to operate in academic spaces?

M. Wyatt: Leading up to my diagnosis, I learned more about ADHD-related “time blindness,” where planning and carrying out tasks far in advance can be difficult, and where it is hard to visualize time beyond “right now.” Because of this, I tend to work best in settings with frequent or externally set deadlines, where expectations and timelines are clear. After my diagnosis, I had more clarity on why I did very well in high school, struggled a bit more in undergrad, and found graduate school more challenging. This was not because I could not do the work, but because academic training increasingly relies on long-term, self-directed planning over

long and often unstructured stretches of time. Learning how to build and maintain that structure took real effort. When I looked back at times when my dissertation progress was slower than I expected, it was not because I was not working. Instead, my attention was often pulled toward tasks that felt more immediately engaging or time-bound, such as collaborative side projects, service, or teaching and mentoring undergraduate students. I tended to make strong progress in focused bursts before conferences or committee meetings, when deadlines felt more concrete, followed by periods of fatigue once that urgency passed. Receiving an ADHD diagnosis helped me recognize these patterns and adjust my routines in ways that better support how I work within academic environments.

C.S. Gillespie: Stigma. My identity really made me believe I did not belong in science, even if I loved it. A “scientist” to me was someone who focused on one subject and studied it with laser-focus, becoming a total and complete expert in their field. My attention jumped around, I became fascinated with different things, I enjoyed varying experiences. This fear was cemented in my BSc and MSc degrees, where I was judged for being too “silly,” for not studying for long periods of time at once, for doing assignments last-minute. Everyone around me was laser-focused, competitive, and they knew exactly what they wanted to research. They had their questions and future research group all mapped out before we graduated. In this environment, I felt completely false. I am interested in so many things—which is a benefit but also sometimes a struggle—that it felt like I didn’t fit into the narrative of a scientist that I believed in, and had been shown. I was (am, with some countermeasures now in place) disorganized, consistently late, and forgetful. I was treated as comic relief in most of my classes, even with my high grades and high-quality coursework. This was incredibly damaging.

I had an incredibly hurtful experience in my studies that made academia feel completely closed-off to me. We had a scientific paper analysis exam—exactly as it sounds, we had to read and fully understand a paper and answer questions on it in a closed-book exam. It was not a subject I was extremely familiar with, and I had the aforementioned chronic anxiety reading it as I consistently felt, well. . . stupid. Now, I know this is a key part of the journey, even if I struggle to remember it sometimes, but I was undiagnosed until after my MSc with my ADHD so my struggles felt like laziness and failures. I stayed up til 3 a.m. with a friend studying this paper and referencing others to understand it. Finally something clicked, and I felt I had understood a key methodology in the paper and its result. I felt like I actually understood, truly, finally. In the exam, there were questions

that felt like tricks. They were too simple, and the answers I could come up with seemed stupid and too easy to be correct. However, the hard, difficult thing that had clicked for me was asked, and I felt great pride being able to answer it. When we got our physical papers back, my friend (who had written almost the same answers as me, as we worked so closely together on this) had gotten an A, and I had been given a C. I noticed one page of my answer sheets had no pen marks, like it had been stuck together when the professor marked it, and had been missed. So, I went straight from the collection to the professor’s desk, emailed them the issue and left it on their desk as they assured me they would review it. I was called in for a meeting, and I felt relief and joy, finally this would be corrected. Instead, I was accused of cheating. Because, of course, why would I not be able to answer the “simple” questions, but I correctly answered the “hard” question that only 3 others in my class also managed? I explained that this was how my brain worked, I could more easily understand something with a “story” (context, reasoning) rather than straight facts, and had believed that the “simple” answers could not have been correct, that I thought there had to be more to it I had not understood. This was treated with total skepticism and I was told that the incident would not go on my record “this time.” My faith in academia, in learning, was completely shattered. It took years to recover from this, and only with a supportive environment, diagnosis, recognition, and treatment, have I been able to move on and retry in academia.

T. Cronin: I would say a large portion of the difficulty comes from social aspects in science and academia. Given that I did not know most my diagnoses (or likely diagnoses that have not yet been formally given) until I was well into my program, I often would not realize things I said or did that were considered abnormal to neurotypicals, often leading to people forming opinions or being upset with me without realizing. Additionally, the current setup of academia in terms of specific due dates for assignments without flexibility was difficult to navigate given some of my health issues. As some days health can impact my ability to work, not having the flexibility of a day or two on a tight deadline often was a great source of stress and made it difficult to perform in academic spaces.

Y. Chen: I think academia can be challenging for people because it sometimes demands people to “read the environment” in a short period of time, to understand a lot of implied messages, and to behave as expected. This demand, in many occasions, is closely tied to the science we are doing, our interpersonal relationships, or even how successful we can be in the next steps of our career.

R. Martínez-Miras: I’m from Spain, and I moved to Switzerland for my master’s, and to Germany for my

PhD. Having to move around is common in academia and has brought many challenges for me. This is a big factor I consider when planning the next steps in my career.

Just changing institutions already means starting over in many ways. Getting support for your needs requires a lot of self-advocacy, and doing that in a place where you do not have trusted people, puts yourself in a very vulnerable position. Sometimes you end up getting the support you need, and other times you only find people that are willing to help, but can't. And sometimes, talking to someone that is supposed to help goes very wrong and makes things worse.

When you are moving countries, adjusting to a new culture adds an extra layer of challenge. From my experience, it can make a big difference on how topics like neurodivergence and mental health are understood (if they are understood at all), and what resources are available (if there are any). To get the care you need, you also have to navigate a new healthcare system. It is not always possible to continue getting care from your home country, and it is not always possible to get it in the new one.

And you have to do all this at the same time that you're starting a new position, maybe working on a new topic, and without having friends or a support system nearby.

A. Schulz: I'm a postdoc in Germany. I will answer for academia in general. And I think, to me, one of the things that has been incredibly challenging as a neurodivergent scientist has been the faculty job application process. And I'll just say also, for those of you that are applying to postdocs or etc, I think in graduate school as well, is in a lot of other fields. I'll give law as an example. When you apply to law school, there's a general law application. You submit basically one application, and you check the box of every single school that you're interested in. And I feel like all of . . . clusterfrick academia, because one of the things I have to be like every day, checking all of these faculty websites every day, doing all of these things. And you have to, like, force yourself to do that. And so I think because of the fluidity of academia, it makes it incredibly challenging to have a consistent set of like goals for looking at some of these applications. And I think it is really, really difficult and challenging for me to sit down and spend the amount of time that I probably should every single day doing that, so I think that is really, really difficult for me as a neurodivergent scientist.

N. DesJardins: I'm a postdoc, and I would like to piggyback just a little bit off of what A. Schulz said in regards to the faculty job search. I'm currently applying for biology faculty jobs, and one thing that I'm still trying to figure out how to handle is being able to go on job interviews. I've always struggled with interviews my entire

career. I had a lot of trouble with them when I was applying to grad school as well. Interviews require a very specific set of skills and really, really heavy masking if you're neurodivergent, and that doesn't necessarily correlate with how well you're going to do the job at hand. Academic job interviews can be especially grueling because they usually require traveling to a new city and meeting with a ton of people in a single day for short amounts of time, and that can be exhausting if your brain doesn't handle change well. I think about an interview as kind of a barrier to entry to a position as a neurodivergent person because of those difficulties.

S. Sowa: A. Schulz and N. DesJardins, boy, you guys said it. I have GAD and like you guys said, the social aspect of academia is very difficult for me. Especially coming to this conference and having to talk to so many different people. Socializing is one of those skills that is expected of us as academics. Similarly, I applied for PhD programs this cycle and the expectation that I have to search for all of these faculty members, reach out to them, send a cold email and if I get a response, then I have to talk to them. Perhaps over Zoom, or if I get a request for an in person meeting, especially if it's an institution that's near me, that is another layer of social interaction I have to mentally prepare myself for. It is all really daunting, because I would like to appear incredibly interested, but meeting with somebody in person and speaking like this with the waiver in my voice is not necessarily something that I would want to do if I want to make a good impression. To make meaningful connections it seems like you have to know a guy who knows a guy, or network and talk to complete strangers. All of these things that I know are really important, but do not necessarily reflect my academic abilities. Once I get to know people, and I get to be very comfortable, I can be more extroverted and less nervous but it's very difficult. As someone who is autism-suspicious, I am still learning about all of the different ways that people who are diagnosed overlap with the way I experience the world. I try to use a lot of the tools and resources that other people share as a way to help myself cope and figure out why am I like this? Why can't I just connect with people? Why can't I just socialize? Why is it so difficult for me to stand in front of a bunch of people and speak even though I'm smart and I know what I'm talking about? A big part of continuing your career in higher education is expanding your circle and speaking to new people. It is such a crucial part of how institutions make decisions about where you can go next in your career and where you belong. I'm finishing my Masters degree this spring and hopefully defending as well so I have already been through the graduate school application process before. Each time I complete one step in my academic career and try to get to the next step, I have to continuously

get over that hurdle of expected socialization. I try to figure out ways I can, force myself into this box, and appear like I know what I'm doing and I know what I'm talking about. Even if I am visibly nervous and my voice waivers, I am still very capable of productive and intelligent conversation. I appreciate hearing that I am not the only one who struggles with the social aspect of continuing a career in higher education and research. It is very encouraging to hear that other people are going through the same thing.

C. Kaelin: I'm just an undergraduate, so I haven't really entered academia. However, one thing I will say that kind of bothers me a lot is how the academic papers are written in general. I already tend to struggle with reading because I (and many others) will lose focus while reading and have to reread segments many times over to understand what it is saying. With the way academic papers are read, it is 10 times worse. And this holds for neurotypical individuals as well. Papers are written to other experts in the field, making it laborious for anyone who isn't an expert to digest. Why? If you want your knowledge to be shared, why would you write it in such a way that only people who already know the material can understand it? Seems counter intuitive. Why not make short summaries for each sentence in plain english? I think that there are a lot of cases like these, where the structure and historical practices are actually inefficient for everyone. Making changes that benefit neurodivergent scientists will benefit *all* scientists. That is what I believe. Maybe that's a crazy thought, who knows. I'm only an undergraduate, after all.

B. Shanafelt: While in recent years there has been more conversation and awareness surrounding ADHD and other neurodivergent conditions, I've found our field reacts in widely different ways. For instance, when I was working in field biology, I was told directly that my concerns were mine alone and it wasn't my supervisor's job to solve my problems. On the other hand, in a more traditional academic setting, I could tell that there was intentional effort by the institution I was a part of and some of the professors. When I vocalized my needs, most professors responded with grace, leniency, and understanding. However, there were still some that made life difficult. I'll highlight two personalities here. First, there's the professor who says they understand but in reality makes little effort to accommodate effectively. The second is the professor who over-corrects but fails to communicate—the one who assumes they know what I need, but fails to adjust when I attempt to communicate my actual needs. While academic institutions are increasing their effort to spread awareness on neurodivergence in academia, I believe there is still a lot of work to be done to effectively create spaces where all academics can succeed.

U. Müller: I want to give a trigger warning, because I am sharing traumatic experiences as a feminine-presenting nonbinary person with autism.

My ability to publish my scholarly contributions has been impacted severely by the intersectionality of these identities. Over my 30-year career, I felt coerced by superiors and colleagues to add co-authors whose contributions did not merit co- or lead authorship, and—vice versa—I have been denied lead or co-authorship despite my contributions meriting such a position. These incidents were perpetrated by multiple PIs and collaborators. By the time I gained a tenure-track faculty position, almost half of my publications were affected. This type of discrimination is well-documented for gender (West et al. 2013; Frances et al. 2020; Kusumegi et al. 2025), and other axes of diversity (Marschke et al. 2018; Martin et al. 2024).

Throughout my career, my neurodivergence has caused interactions that create an unhealthy work environment for people with autism. Having been undiagnosed exacerbated the situation, leaving me ill-prepared to recognize problematic situations and to defend myself effectively. People with autism are more likely to be bullied and sexually and physically assaulted compared with neurotypical people and people with other neurodivergent conditions (Cazalis et al. 2022; Gibbs and Pellicano 2023; Fox 2025; Weinreich et al. 2023; for a review of recent work see the Introduction section of Kildahl and Helveschou 2024). For example, I have a strong startle response due to my hypervigilance, and colleagues would make it a sport to startle me on an almost daily basis. Until my diagnosis, I did not recognize bullying behaviors for what they were and responded by fawning, which is a known masking response. Being diagnosed, I am gradually re-evaluating and recognizing past bullying instants. For example, several of my PIs singled me out for continual verbal abuse in private and public conversations, disparaging the quality of my work as “mediocre,” “unoriginal,” “unworthy of special recognition,” and “in need of being re-done so it could be done properly”; disparaging my work ethics while I was working 10-h shifts each day, including weekends, yet, due to severe nightly panic attacks, I worked mainly at night and slept in the morning; ridiculing my appearance.

Especially harmful were autistic meltdowns I had at work in front of colleagues. These meltdowns were triggered by me witnessing particularly callous and unethical behaviors toward another person. Afterward, my relation with colleagues who witnessed a meltdown deteriorated precipitously, and I was told that I am “unprofessional,” that I “don't fit in,” and that I am “causing a toxic work environment.” Since my diagnosis, I am better at recognizing when I am in danger of a melt-down,

and I am often able to remove myself from the situation in time. Being diagnosed, I recognize that I careen between extreme bluntness (calling out unethical and unprofessional behavior) and fawning (not standing up for myself, all the way to not defending myself when I am being physically or sexually assaulted).

B. Fitzwater: When I was diagnosed autistic, my practitioner disclosed that I had a low processing speed. This was something I had known about myself for my entire life, but I felt inadequate or like something was wrong with me for all of the years that I did not know that I was autistic. I always took longer on tests than everyone else despite typically performing well, and instructors and professors would usually have to cut me off. I also always took longer on lab tasks and fieldwork, and seemingly “simple” protocols within my field that took my peers a few hours would take me days to complete. I would overcompensate for this by working very long days and oftentimes working through the evening and night or even weekends to “keep up” with everyone else. I appear to always be very early or on time, but it is at a great personal cost to me, and it may take more energy and time for me to complete the same task. What may leave one person feeling minimally tired will completely drain me, but I have to pretend that I do not feel that way so I am not perceived as “weak” or “not cut out” for the field I’ve been fighting to be a part of since I was in late middle school. This has led to severe exhaustion, burnout, and emotionally low points. I also get very anxious about missing deadlines and often like to be prepared well in advance. Short turnarounds can stress and exhaust me because it takes me longer to process and work on something than many of my peers, particularly under stress. I need a long time to process ideas, and I tend to ask a lot of clarifying questions. I also need a lot of details to feel comfortable performing something before I do it, and it is hard for me to jump in when I don’t feel adequately prepared or understand the conceptualization or protocol behind the work. Additionally, I have difficulty with change. Here, I want to clarify that I do NOT mean change in terms of evolving scientific thought, I am referring to unexpected changes in surroundings, schedules, or protocols. For example, a room I was working in to conduct research was suddenly changed without me knowing it would be, and I had a physical and emotional response that was akin to feeling in danger, overwhelming dread, and I felt like crying. In that moment, I was shocked by my own emotions and physiological response and was thinking, “What the hell is wrong with me?” I had to process with my therapist that the way my brain is wired makes me think those situations are dangerous even if they are not and that it’s a natural response for my specific brain and body, not a failing. Many aspects

of academia want to point to “weaknesses” that “should be addressed/corrected,” but for many neurodivergent individuals and disabled biologists in general, there are parts of ourselves that we cannot and should not need to fix. I tried desperately to increase my processing speed to no avail, and I thought it was a personal failing until my diagnosis. We need to fundamentally shift how we think about the ways in which we conduct science so that everyone can participate and thrive. Many have already been calling for changes in science at large because the way that we are operating is mentally taxing and damaging for everyone, not just neurodivergent scientists (Limas et al. 2022). None of us are machines, we are people.

A. Steele: I have multiple identities that really shape how I thought about answering this question. I am a first-generation college student, neurodivergent, and a brand new professor. There are so many expectations for how to behave or think or exist in academia that are unspoken, and it always seems like everyone else knows those rules. In graduate school, I struggled with the unspoken expectations to work long days, or that if I was not constantly thinking about science, then I was not meant to be a scientist. I observed so many people follow these “rules” but no one ever told them that’s how they’re supposed to be, so I didn’t understand where these rules came from or why things had to be that way. Which, coincidentally, lead me into the research I completed for my dissertation, which explored how these unspoken expectations are driven by neoliberal (Steele and Parson 2025a) and gendered discourses (Steele and Parson 2025b) that value overworking and an “ideal” scientist that is able-bodied, masculine, and follows Western ideals. So, in a way, trying to understand *why* science and academia are the way that they are lead me to an entire research field, which I find so fascinating. As a new assistant professor in a teaching-focused position, I’ve found the expectations to be “on” all of the time absolutely exhausting, and trying to navigate a heavy teaching load while figuring out what accommodations I can have or pursue is very emotionally and mentally taxing. I’ve found myself coming home exhausted after a long day of teaching and needing one to two days to mentally and emotionally recover, but not getting the space to do that. I never really vibed with the spoon theory, but I play Dungeons and Dragons, and my energy feels more like a spell slot that gets replenished on both a short and long rest. Most of the time, I feel like I’m just barely keeping the core spell slots replenished with short rests, until I burn out and am forced to take a long rest. I’ve also found it challenging to work in a system that rewards follow-through and finishing projects independently, rather than idea generation and creativity and collaboration.

A. Tissot: The way the classes are conducted, and the rigidity of the material was a huge barrier for me. I received less than average grades in a lot of my core classes, both because the material was delivered in a way that didn't make sense to me, and the standardized testing was an absolute nightmare. Furthermore, I didn't know that I needed accommodations when I was an undergraduate, and so being in standard classroom settings was immensely distracting and difficult for someone with ADHD, sensory sensitivities, and auditory processing delays. I struggled with math and chemistry in the way that it was taught, and I was led to understand that that was *my* fault, and there was something *wrong with me*. In one example, I had a calculus professor that was very strict about their material and made me feel like I was incapable of doing math. I failed the course and had to retake it over the summer, but that professor was so much more engaging and flexible that I got an A. Additionally, the overall stigma surrounding neurodiversity made it even more challenging as it pushed me further away from seeking a diagnosis. Even after going through the diagnosis and assessment processes, I often compared myself to other graduate students that were able to finish their work more quickly, or conduct research that seemed to be of a higher quality. These comparisons often resulted in shame spiraling, making it even more difficult to complete my work.

C. Spear: As my thoughts often do seem random or disconnected to others, I have found this can create miscommunication. If I misinterpret a question and then answer how I understood it, then the result can sometimes cause confusion or misalignment. Instead of asking for clarification or to try to understand where or how the miscommunication happened, I find that many academics assume the worst instead. There are plenty of times where I was unaware that a miscommunication occurred until someone else said something that added clarity—which I greatly appreciate.

Neurodiversity in the classroom

As the name suggests, neurodivergent students often present divergent ways of thinking and processing the world, and this can be especially true in the classroom setting (Salvatore et al. 2024). Neurodivergent students may also be less likely to complete courses or may also have lower mental health than their neurotypical peers (Kennedy et al. 2025). In this section, we discuss our own experiences as neurodivergent students and suggest strategies to improve neurodivergent student engagement and success in post-secondary courses.

What is something that you wish more instructors, professors, or advisors knew about working with neurodivergent students?

T. Lepore: A good deal of my current research work involves talking with neurodivergent STEM instructors and students about their experiences, but here, I'll talk about what I personally wish more instructors, students, and advisors knew about neurodivergence and working with neurodivergent students. In short, we need more awareness that neurodivergent and disabled people are present in our academic spaces, and we need more visible, proud, public community-building that is neurodivergent- and disability-centered. I've been told more than once that neurodivergent people, especially neurodivergent faculty and staff, probably won't be present or at least won't open up about their identities on a college campus. I don't think this needs to be the case, as we're demonstrating in our paper. I've been told by a professor that they haven't had any neurodivergent students in their classrooms, to their knowledge, which seems shocking and probably inaccurate. So, what can we do about building awareness and building community?

Many times, academic spaces will have supports for disabled students within disability services or perhaps a medical center on a college campus. These can be good individual supports, and there are sometimes community-building or mentorship activities that occur through these programs; I know of at least one of these on a college campus. However, I'm thinking bigger than that. When I was a PhD student at UC Berkeley, a group of mostly undergraduates lobbied to have a Disability Cultural and Community Center space, which became a physical space on campus, next to many of the other multicultural centers, with student workers and full-time director staff. This became a space where disabled people could host events, gather in community, and share resources. Without spaces like these, neurodivergent (and more broadly disabled) people sometimes aren't expected within science or academic spaces, and I think these visible community centers can really make a difference. Even within spaces that value multifaceted diversity, disability and neurodivergence can sometimes become an afterthought. Let's work to change that in our class spaces and our academic communities.

B. Shanafelt: Neurodivergence is far more diverse than a list of learning disabilities or accommodations. As such, the response to neurodivergent students must also go beyond what the "best available science" says. The catchy "10 things you need to know" articles, and even the literature can be incomplete. There's no one-size-fits-all approach to working with neurodivergent

learners, even if they are diagnosed with the same condition. Honestly, I think that professors, teachers and advisors should receive specific training, or take specific courses on neurodevelopmental theory in tandem with how to effectively partner with neurodiverse learners. It goes beyond the preparation though and must occur intentionally within the classroom/lab—Professors must be willing to actively listen and adapt to student needs to ensure their success. Flexibility and effective communication are crucial elements of this. While structure and rigid frameworks are essential in the scientific and biological content, flexibility and understanding are crucial when educating and working with students.

A. Schulz: My response here is short. Humans love to think of things in patterns and often educators/professors/instructors/etc. will superimpose support they have given to a past neurodivergent student/researcher onto a new neurodivergent student/researcher. Every person is unique and to generate a psychologically safe space for your students, it needs to be a constant conversation. For my students and classes, I have a mental health statement where I share some of my experiences without oversharing. I worked with my therapist and psychiatrist so that this statement would minimize triggers and would not be oversharing. Work to be open and work to be curious, not judgmental toward your students.

J. Marquardt: I agree wholeheartedly with A. Schulz. Every student, no matter what neurotype, is wonderfully, beautifully, unique and they deserve to be seen for themselves. Creating a classroom that is a psychologically safe space where students can show up as their authentic selves needs to be a goal for all educators. Students cannot meaningfully engage in learning or be productive if they do not feel safe. So much can be gained from practicing kindness, and having a little empathy. A lot of neurodivergent identities are often invisible or being masked, so giving the benefit of the doubt, and openly communicating should become the default rather than assuming that a student is slacking or trying to game the system.

U. Müller: I had many students in my classes who were many different types of neurodivergent. What stands out to me is how often these students are stigmatized by their classmates and instructors for asking different types of questions, for interacting with prompts and assignments in a different way from neurotypical students. I am dismayed about how comfortable those classmates and instructors are with labeling those students' performance as inferior, all the way to "not meeting standards," when in fact the contributions of these neurodivergent students are often profound, insightful, innovative, and challenging the status quo. Many of the

summative assessment techniques used throughout education are disadvantaging neurodivergent students. I do not need accommodations that allow me to complete an oral or written exam. I need forms of formative and summative assessment that do not merely remediate the challenges that neurodiverse students face in environments designed by and for neurotypical people, but that empower neurodivergent students to showcase their skills and strengths.

A. Tissot: Not all students are diagnosed, or aware that they need a diagnosis. If they are struggling, then do not assume that they are lazy. It is possible they don't know they need help, or if they do, they may be afraid to ask for it. Furthermore, it can often be very difficult for a student to share that they are neurodivergent, so if they do you should treat it as a very special form of trust, and if they do not, please do not push them for it. Additionally, diagnoses are not accessible for everyone and there are often stigmas or consequences involved with getting a formal diagnosis, so the accommodations that universities can sometimes provide are not available to everyone. Just assume the best in people, in general students aren't trying to take advantage of the system, they're trying to get help. Even more, challenge your understanding of neurodivergent identities. I have often found that people seem understanding when I share that I am autistic or have ADHD, but when it comes to accommodating me they disregard or invalidate my requests because they don't fit their understanding of what that identity needs.

B. Fitzwater: If a student feels safe enough to talk to you about their neurodivergent identity, treat it as important. It likely took a lot of courage for them to tell you. Tell them, "Thank you for entrusting me with that information." Do not tell them that you could or could not tell that they are neurodivergent because this can be incredibly invalidating and make them feel unsafe. Neurodivergent students are not "lazy," they may not have the tools necessary or the cognitive load or even experience to know how to help themselves or ask for help. Additionally, [Gin et al. \(2022\)](#) shared an example where a principal investigator (PI) spoke negatively about ADHD to a trainee in front of another trainee who had ADHD but had not disclosed their identity to the PI. This was upsetting to the trainee. Never speak poorly about neurodivergent identities or what you perceive of them in front of trainees. If the trainees perceive that you are speaking negatively about their identity (whether they disclosed it to you or not), then they may feel less safe around you, your classroom, or your lab group. This could lead them to be less likely to ask you for help or tell you when something is wrong, which could have negative consequences for both of you. Language is important, and using ableist terms or phrases

such as “everyone is a little autistic/OCD/ADHD/etc.” can minimize the lived experiences of your peers and students who may be struggling in secret.

J. Galvez: I want to really echo what B. Fitzwater said and add a bit of my own perspective. It's critically important to never presume or assume anyone's neurodivergent identity (or lack thereof), and when someone discloses theirs to you, treat it with the utmost respect without infantilizing them. Please also never use neurodivergent terminology as adjectives to describe behaviors, such as equating organizational skills with OCD. It is also important to never under any circumstances imply or state that a neurodivergent identity is a weakness or a hurdle to overcome. I had this happen to me before I was diagnosed or even aware that I could have OCD, and it was incredibly harmful in the moment, and even more so once I was formally diagnosed.

C.S. Gillespie: Every person is different, and what works for one person will not work for all. I have friends that need big projects to dive into and fixate on for long periods of time. While I also enjoy working toward a larger goal, I need diversity in my work to sustain my attention and drive. It does not mean that I am less committed than, for example, my friend who focuses on one big homogenous project. It is simply how my brain works, that neurodivergent brains (in my case, as ADHD-inattentive) thrive on novelty. By capitalizing on that I can produce my best work, feel fulfilled, and excited by what I'm doing. Another note, that others have mentioned here, is clear and consistent communication. We do not need our hands held every step, but to have clearly defined expectations and just some understanding is invaluable. People are not machines, and our timelines may look different to other students, but our results are no less brilliant when we are given the support and space to perform at our best. For example, I may have burnout for days where I am totally unproductive. However, in a matter of hours I can achieve days' worth of work. The freedom to work to my own schedule (of course, provided the work is still done) has been crucial for me.

S. Huč: I wish more people understood that even though our results as students are sometimes less than what we, or they, would like them to be, it does not mean that we are not trying our very best. A lot of times we will excel, but a lot of times we may also struggle with time management. We may leave things until the last minute for various reasons. This is not something we are doing on purpose, and it is not because we don't care about our work. Often, we care too much about our work and get in our head about it because of past experiences. It turns into a negative feedback loop that we have to work hard

to get out of. Additionally, in my case and in some of my peers that I have talked to, we already make ourselves feel bad about “not doing a good enough job.” While realistic feedback is necessary and we all need to be able to take constructive criticism, excessive negativity toward your students will likely cause us to perform worse than we would otherwise. In fact, this probably goes for any student, regardless of their neurodivergence. A little understanding and encouragement goes a long way in academia, it is definitely something that I have experienced as beneficial.

T. Cronin: There are a few things that I wish more instructors, professors, and advisors knew. One that I believe is very important, is that asking clarifying questions is not a challenge to your authority or an attempt to undermine you. Rather it is an attempt to connect, understand the logic, and fully engage in a topic and/or task given to us. Ultimately understanding this logic and rationale allows for many neurodivergent individuals to perform at their best and avoid making mistakes that may frustrate others. Related to this idea, I also believe it is important for instructors, professors, and advisors to know the importance of direct communication for many neurodivergent (ND) individuals. While not all ND individuals struggle with social cues, those that do may struggle to pick up on subtle messages or hints being communicated to them, leading to mistakes and misunderstandings that can cause frustration and reduce working efficiency. For me personally, upon learning an individual commonly relies on subtext to deliver messages, it causes me to continually overthink and overexamine conversations with that individual in order to avoid adverse future interactions due to missed social cues. Finally, I feel it is important that others know that the timing of being diagnosed/learning an individual is ND presents different challenges and needs. In particular, those that receive diagnoses late in life often are not entirely aware of their needs or how their condition impacts aspects of their lives, whereas someone diagnosed at a younger age may have a better grasp on these things. Late-diagnosed individuals therefore may have a more challenging time in the initial period of a diagnosis unlearning negative coping strategies and learning new things about themselves and how to make their lives easier.

R. Martínez-Miras: Neurodivergence is not a “mental health issue.” This doesn't negate the fact that neurodivergent individuals are more likely to experience mental health struggles. It also doesn't mean being neurodivergent is a gift or superpower. For some of us, neurodivergence is a part of our identity. Our struggles are an aspect of being neurodivergent, but so are our favorite parts about ourselves, and the parts others love about us. Reducing neurodivergence to a mental health issue

is very disaffirming, and does more harm than good to our mental well-being.

There is also something important to understand about mental health in general, not only for neurodivergent individuals. There has been an increase of awareness and initiatives around mental health care, but sometimes it is seen as a magic solution. The goal of mental health initiatives should not be to make individuals cope with difficult situations, while ignoring the underlying causes of these problems. We all deserve a life that is more than just surviving.

Also, professional mental health care is a tool, and can be a very positive one, but it is not always that simple, and should not be the only one. Access to therapy isn't always available to everyone. In the best case, a therapeutic process is still not a fast and straightforward path. Seeking professional support can also be a very negative and harmful experience for some people, especially neurodivergent individuals. The medical community has held onto very harmful ideas and practices for very long. Nowadays, the understanding and approach still varies a lot between professionals. Mental health care is only a part of the solution, and it can be a very helpful tool, but we should not rely only on that.

S. Sowa: As someone who has worked as an instructor with neurodivergent students in both an academic and performing arts environment, I always say there are certain things about the learning and scientific process that need to be taken seriously and there are certain things that do not need to be taken as seriously. For me, as an instructor, when working with neurodivergent students, especially ones with accommodations, due dates for small simple assignments are the least of my concern. What I look for and appreciate in my students is honest and authentic engagement with the material and participating in the scientific process of asking questions and seeking answers. That is what I take seriously. Due dates and hard deadlines can be very overwhelming for a lot of people with vast neurodivergent identities so taking the pressure off of some of those relatively trivial things and putting more focus on engaging with an assignment or activity to learn something helps my students enjoy the lesson or unit much more. I think other instructors and professors can benefit from reframing the way they approach assignments and deadlines with their students. Having an honest approach where you reflect to your students that your main goal for them is to learn the science and understand why the concepts are important, they feel more welcomed in your classroom. I also encourage all my students, but especially my neurodivergent students, to always reach out to me with questions or concerns they have. I have an open door policy and I am always willing to listen to feedback or

suggestions for how I can make my classroom more inclusive. I am a young graduate student instructor and I am much closer to my undergraduate students in my career than a tenured professor who has been teaching and researching for several decades. However, I believe all instructors and professors regardless of age or experience have an obligation to connect with their students and listen to what they might need to make their learning environment more inclusive and successful. As an educator, I know that class time and the learning experience are not about me but rather all about my students. Being able to receive feedback, whether or not you apply it, is an invaluable skill to have not just as an educator but as a researcher and a scientist. The discussion and improvement of ideas and practices is built into the discipline, the same should go for the classroom. Having open communication with your students not only shows that an instructor cares about their learning but it also encourages students who may not have accommodations, or who have anxiety and difficulty talking to authority figures, like professors, to speak up and ask for some help. One of the best things a neurodivergent person in academia can learn is how to advocate for themselves and all it could take is one instructor or professor providing space for them to explore those kinds of discussions to show that student what they can accomplish when they just ask for help.

C. Kaelin: As a current undergraduate and a tutor, I am on both sides of this topic. During lectures, part of my brain is always analyzing the way things are being taught. I note the things I like and mentally decide what I would change and how I would change it. There is a fact that I feel is simple yet often forgotten: Learning can be fun. Neurodivergents (and neurotypicals) have an easier time focusing on things that are fun and engaging. We love when professors throw in humor like means to explain concepts. And if you do slideshows, please annotate them as you go. This helps students stay engaged and makes it less overwhelming because it helps slow the lecture down. Professors sometimes have a tendency to move too fast. I also think that because this modern world has so many distractions, engaging teaching is imperative. When I look around my classes, a concerning number of my peers are on their phones. This number decreases in lectures with passionate professors who put effort into making it fun. As a neurodivergent student myself, there is a lot less strain on my brain when I focus on things I enjoy.

C. Spear: If a student answers a question, responds, or behaves in a way that seems out of character or confusing, please gently ask for clarity instead of assuming the student is "lazy" or being intentionally negative in some way. It is more likely that the student had a different interpretation of the assignment, question, or unde-

defined expectations. When people talk as a goal to discover and overcome the problem rather than viewing the other person as the problem, then both can learn how the other person communicates and how to move forward with collaborations. This misinterpretation can also extend to exam questions as well. While there is no singular solution for exams, I find it is particularly important for formats such as short answer questions that if a student seems to completely miss what the question was asking that the professor rereads the question to see if they can better understand how the student interpreted the question and then if the student answered it fully based on that interpretation.

What are some strategies that have helped you in the classroom? What suggestions do you have to make classes more inclusive?

M. Wyatt: Much of my teaching is shaped by what I wish I had experienced as a student. One of my main priorities in the classroom is setting clear expectations for what success looks like. I do this in part by using detailed rubrics, so students know what I expect them to submit in order to earn full credit. I also try to scaffold discussions and lab activities by clearly outlining the purpose of each task. For example, I explain why I am asking students to read a particular paper or what they should be paying attention to when working with a specimen, rather than expecting them to infer those goals on their own. Without that guidance, students may struggle to see the motivation behind an assignment or focus on details that are interesting but not central to the learning objectives. Beyond setting expectations, I try to build flexibility into assignments by allowing students to lean into their interests within clear parameters. Giving students some choice in topic selection often increases their engagement and investment in the work. It also benefits me as an instructor, since I get to evaluate a wider range of ideas rather than many versions of the same assignment.

B. Fitzwater: I introduce the course by saying outright that we are there to grow and learn together, regardless of neurotype. I approach the course from a position of understanding that students are there to learn and that they will not know everything immediately. I also disclose that I am neurodivergent, and I try to adopt an outward appearance of patience and non-judgmental empathy, even if it is something “they should already know.” “There are no bad questions!” is a starting philosophy in all courses I teach, and this allows everyone, not just neurodivergent students, to ask questions that, to an expert, may seem trivial but ultimately help the students process the material. I think of my students as people first, students second, with lived experiences that they

bring to the classroom which may inform their prior knowledge and skillset. I reach out if the student is missing assignments and try to help make them involved in their own learning. However, it is of course important to remember that you can only help students who want to be helped, so after a certain point of reaching out, you have to adopt an approach that you have done what you can. A universal design for learning can also help not just neurodivergent students, but the entire class.

T. Cronin: One of the biggest things I would say I wish more people knew is that being neurodivergent is complex and that individuals do not always know everything about themselves or how they respond/react to things. This is especially relevant to those that receive late diagnoses, as it can take years of unlearning things and re-learning things about themselves. So, I would ask that people be patient and curious, rather than getting frustrated and making judgements quickly. As with everyone else, we are humans trying to survive in this world and constantly learning about ourselves. Judgement and frustration presented toward individuals does not help anyone and I would go as far as saying it actually hinders the progress of humanity and STEM.

S. Huč: As both a student and an instructor, I know that time management can oftentimes be an issue for neurodivergent students. When teaching, I try to mentally prepare scenarios of how some work can be completed at a later time if students don't manage to get through everything while in the classroom or lab. In some cases, I know that is not possible, but in others, students can, for instance, take photos of specimens and draw them later, or there can be a make-up time built into the course. In the case of my biodiversity labs, before an exam, we allow the students to come in on their own time and study whatever they feel least confident on. Another aspect that I have found helpful is communicating well with either instructors or students, depending on your role. If you are an instructor, then I think it is important to explicitly tell all of your students that you are open to communication from them regarding their work and deadlines. Let your students know you are there for them, your job is to guide them in learning something new. As a student, if you are running into issues with deadlines, need longer for the same tasks as your peers, or have external circumstances happening preventing you from completing your expected work at the expected timeline, it is best to communicate an appropriate amount (don't overshare) with your instructor. Instructors tend to be nicer if they know in advance what your situation is, than if they don't hear anything from you and you are not meeting expectations. They of course also have no obligation to be lenient in any way, it just usually in my experience from both sides helps.

A. Tissot: In virtual settings, allowing for the camera to be off. As a former instructor, I completely understand how awkward it is to be teaching to a bunch of black screens, but the freedom to accommodate yourself without worrying about distracting your fellow students or “getting caught” doing behaviors that may seem strange can make a huge difference. During virtual classes and trainings, I will often turn my camera off and bounce around or walk back and forth. A range of motion really helps me focus more but I was always taught to be quiet and sit still in school, so having the camera on doesn’t allow me to feel comfortable. Additionally, using a range of different media in lectures and changing or taking breaks periodically was always helpful. Sitting down for an hour and listening to a lecture was always challenging. Recording lectures and including subtitles on the screen would also be life changing; in my opinion, these should become standard practice to accommodate individuals with deafness, auditory processing disorders, and more.

B. Shanafelt: Working in special education at the High School level has brought me a unique perspective on this. One crucial narrative to uphold is that students are intelligent—it is not our calling (as educators) to lower the standards to meet specific student’s needs, but rather to provide support to help those students achieve the standards. It’s about believing they are capable and not discounting them due to their differences. As I said earlier, we need to realize that no single strategy will work for everyone, but some accommodations I have seen work are the following: extended time for assignments/exams, providing copies of lecture notes/extra or alternative resources/activities to guide students, and the biggest of these is intentional and clear communication. It is essential to check in frequently and listen to what students say they need—they are the experts on what works for them.

T. Lepore: I want to echo what several folks have said above about flexibility, humanizing classroom environments, and believing and supporting our students. Even the way we structure a syllabus can make a big difference in how students perceive a class environment; I think many of us are taught, implicitly or explicitly, to come into a class environment with a slightly punitive lens, expecting strict deadlines and punishment for cheating and so on. However, so much of our class environment is ours to change, and to modify with student feedback, too. We’re only as rigid and as punitive as we make ourselves out to be. I would advocate for strategies in the classroom that increase flexibility for multiple modes of student expression of what they’ve learned, and for multiple ways students can access the information we’d like to convey. This is in line with the recently updated Universal Design for Learning 3.0

guidelines (CAST 2024), which also explicitly underscore educational biases rooted in systemic exclusion. Other strategies that help to open dialogue and create a more holistic, welcoming environment for all students include humanizing STEM pedagogy (Addy et al. 2023) and culturally responsive or culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings 1995; Byrd 2016), which emphasize our common humanity, our intersectional identities, and attempts to break down power barriers between instructors and students.

J. Marquardt: I want to build upon what T. Lepore and other folks have mentioned here. Our classrooms, our materials, and the impressions our students have of us as people, scientists, and teachers is for us to create and change as we feel necessary. I think it is important to be intentional in the choices we make. From the first day and syllabus, I am clear about my expectations, policies, and grading. It is worthwhile to have several modalities for both class materials and student assessment. I also think spending time developing a safe, inclusive classroom culture where students feel comfortable speaking up, asking questions, and being wrong sometimes, is important. I try to do this by sharing a little about myself as a person, what I want our classroom to look like, and letting students know it is a collaborative effort, we all have to work together to make that space happen. I also try to model and normalize that not everyone works the same, specifically bringing up the use of fidgets, standing and moving around, and being able to use earplugs during exams if students would like (mechanical only, not bluetooth or electronic). I stress everyone is different, and to practice understanding. I also try to normalize productive failure. As scientists we are often wrong, that is okay and a necessary part of the process. The key is to keep asking questions, to learn from it, and move on.

Navigating our own neurodivergent identities

“Requires support” is not uncommon on an official diagnosis, but often it is unclear where neurodivergent individuals can find support including in academic spaces (Dwyer et al. 2023). Especially for younger scientists, finding resources and strategies for accommodating themselves, either legally or personally, can be difficult. Here, we discuss resources that neurodivergent individuals can use to support themselves in academic settings.

What resources have helped you to navigate academia while being neurodivergent?

N. Bressman: The best resource I have found is other neurodivergent folks that understand my experiences.

We can commiserate, share successful strategies, vent, and discuss our special interests with each other, which greatly reduces feelings of imposter syndrome and increases feelings of inclusion and support. Having other neurodivergent folks around me in academia has encouraged me to seek out improved treatments for my conditions, based on hearing their successes, which has helped me succeed in academia, and outside of it as well.

T. Cronin: Honestly, this will be brief, but the main resources that have helped me navigate are finding others like me. This often is through online communities, but it has helped me realize that my diagnoses and differences to others make me unique and are positive.

N. DesJardins: I agree with T. Cronin that finding others with similar experiences can be a game-changer. As a grad student, I worked with colleagues to advocate for grad student mental health initiatives at our university, and in doing so, I found a community of others that I could be open with about my own experiences. Due to the stigmatized status of neurodivergent conditions in society, we often feel we need to keep them close to our chest, but a lot of us are struggling with similar things and we can help each other and feel less alone once we start talking about our experiences more.

A. Tissot: Community, more than anything. Speaking with other people and learning about different neurotypes, I started to feel more normal and learned many tips that helped me get through school. When immediate community wasn't apparent, I searched online to find podcasts and blogs with tips from people with my brain. There are a few books that really helped me as well, probably my favorite of them is *An Immense World* by Ed Yung. He discusses the diversity of senses in nature and weaves it with human senses and it celebrates diversity and really inspired me and made me feel seen.

S. Huč: Aside from community, for students (also graduate students!), campus counseling centers often hold some very useful workshops or therapy groups. On or off-campus individual therapy has also been helpful.

B. Fitzwater: If you have accommodations, use them! I have had so many students who did not utilize their accommodations for class because they "didn't think they needed them." You can work with your campus' disability services to get accommodations that work best for you, such as extended time on tests or a distraction-free test taking room. You can still get accommodations even as a graduate student! I was able to get accommodations in the last year of my PhD for my committee meetings and defense. As many others have reiterated, finding community and talking with others who have shared identities and experiences can be a game-changer and increase a sense of belonging.

B. Shanafelt: This is more of a mindset than a traditional resource but one I found incredibly valuable dur-

ing my time as a student—that is, self-advocacy. Reaching out early and as-often-as-needed to your professors, advisors, or supervisors is essential. It took me far too long to boldly and unapologetically request the accommodations I knew I needed to succeed and when I finally found my voice, my experience shifted remarkably. Another note here is when you are given accommodations, use them—even if you don't need them, or if you perceive it might inconvenience your professor. It is important to note that not all professors will be as effective or receptive as one would like. In this case, find someone you can speak with—a counselor, advisor, different professor, TA, or whatever. Your voice is your most powerful tool, don't make the mistake I made for too long and forget to use it.

C. Spear: I agree with many people with the advice of finding other neurodiverse people! Additionally, if one feels safe enough to, being open and honest about how one thinks or where one struggles can be helpful. When others better understand how someone that is neurodiverse thinks or what some of their needs are, it can create a much more successful environment for everyone. It took me a while to be comfortable opening up and learning how to navigate these spaces, and while it's still not perfect, things are a lot better now than they were when I was in undergrad!

What strategies have you used to help you operate in an academic setting (i.e., classrooms either as the instructor or as a student, communicating with peers, using shared spaces, long meetings, meeting deadlines, etc.)?

S. Huč: I struggle with time management, and the biggest help with that has been time-blocking. I have a blank notebook that I carry around with me and I write into it a plan for the day by blocks of time. I make sure to include breaks and meals, often following the "Pomodoro method." To avoid getting overwhelmed, I sometimes only time block part of a day at a time, and add to it later as I go through the day. This habit has led to me structuring my time in my head, even when I can't or forget to write down the time blocks into my notebook. It is also helping me not over or underestimate how long certain tasks will take, as it increases my mindfulness. Another coping mechanisms I have built is taking meticulous notes. In classes or in meetings, I will write everything down, often very close to verbatim. This helps me pay attention in the moment, as it occupies all of my brain, and I then have everything written down for when I need to reference it later. The third most helpful strategy I have found for navigating academic settings is telling students and peers that if they email me, while I always try to respond, if I don't, to

please go ahead and re-email me. I am not purposefully ignoring them, the email just got lost in my inbox.

A. Tissot: For my PhD, learning how to break things into smaller pieces and set deadlines for myself to actually get work done was essential. I used websites such as Trello that allowed me to make “to-do” lists with deadlines and checklists that made my brain happy. This was especially helpful during my comprehensive exams when I was staring down 100+ academic papers and textbooks that I needed to read over several months, an absolute nightmare to someone with ADHD. A mountain of work and a lengthy deadline was disastrous, so I was forced to take it in small pieces and set smaller deadlines and create rewards systems to get me to study the material. I also had to use many different tools, there was never one perfect tool for me. Google Calendar has become a lifeline for me, I still cannot remember anything without it, but it was especially helpful when I was dealing with years of burnout in graduate school.

A. Steele: A bullet journal! I started bullet journaling in graduate school and it has honestly been such a lifesaver for me. I write down EVERYTHING in my bullet journal, appointments, notes, things I need to remember or do, and it helps remove a lot of the thoughts and ideas floating around in my head that I’m afraid I’ll forget. I also utilize time blocking and time tracking to help me keep an eye on how much time I’m spending on things. I like to turn it into a game by predicting how much time I think a task will take and then trying to finish it within that time, or try to beat the clock. Tracking my time has been a great strategy for me, because I can categorize what I’m doing and see how much time I’m spending on certain types of tasks. I’ve had to shift a lot of my thinking to reframe it in a helpful way instead of making claims that I’m being unproductive if I don’t spend X amount of time on something. I also really enjoy body-doubling and will schedule writing time or co-working time with friends and colleagues, as that really helps me stay on track. Especially, if I set goals and intentions during the co-working time so I know what I’m working on in each time block. I have also found audio recording notes or conversations (with permission of course) to be really helpful. I have a hard time focusing on verbal instructions, so having a recording or transcript I can refer back to has been immensely helpful, especially when working on a project or writing with someone.

A. Schulz: So, one of my favorite strategies I have for operating in an academic setting is how I read papers. Often in academic spaces I can find that I NEED to read a paper for understanding the background of a field, but I do not get enough enjoyment out of reading a paper with no reward. What I have started doing more recently is I will ask an LLM to give me a summary of the publication and introduce 10 factual errors in the interpreta-

tion. I then have a challenge...try to find all 10 of the factual errors the LLM has introduced. In this way, I need to have a complete conceptual, methodological, statistical, and theoretical understanding of the paper and often I find more than 10 factual errors. So, the paper is read, understood, and my reward is solving the puzzle.

R. Martínez-Miras: Something that really helps me is being in an office and working place that feels like a safe space, and having places for when I need a break. One thing that truly improved my life is when my workplace remodeled an area and added colorful comfortable sofas, swinging chairs, and rocking chairs. I am actively working on understanding my needs better and finding what works for me (also with help of my therapist). My tasks vary a lot, and so does my capacity, so I try to plan in a way that gives myself flexibility, and to keep in mind my needs before I start to feel the burnout. I consider what I can adjust if I need, or I can ask for: meetings or events that I can attend online, things I can handle in writing instead of in person, and days I can work from home or an alternative place. I also give myself time to recharge after situations that take a lot of energy or when I’m getting burnout. It is not always possible, and figuring this out is a continuous learning process, but it does get better, especially when you’re in a safe and supportive environment.

N. Bressman: I have found that being honest with my students about being neurodivergent helps. I tell them right away that I understand different people learn things better in different ways, so if they need me to rephrase something or explain something with a different example or language, I am happy to do so. This has allowed me to better accommodate my students but also take some pressure off of me given I don’t need to expend extra energy masking my way through every class.

S. Knutie: I was a terrible student in the traditional sense of the definition. By far, I preferred hands-on experiences at jobs or by volunteering than sit in a lecture hall. Ever since I decided to pursue academia for a career, I was committed to experiential learning and creating an inclusive classroom. Since I am a terrible test taker, I wanted to develop course material that demonstrated learning in other ways. I am now an associate professor at a large research institution and teach medium-sized lecture courses (e.g., 50–80 students). These course sizes means that experiential learning can be difficult to implement, but with the support of my department, I have been able to lead a different type of class. Knowledge is not assessed with in class tests, instead, we have online assessments that are open book and not timed, scientific method worksheets, and class research projects that generate (hopefully) publishable data (i.e., Course-based Undergraduate Research Experience [CURE]). My concern for the future is the lack of

funding for public institutions, and thus lack of teaching support.

T. Lepore: Yes! With regard to emails, I started putting an email signature that reads: “I work to cultivate communities of care in academia, meaning I care deeply about our personal well-being and building empathy-and-equity centered communities at large.

I may reply to emails at differing hours from your work schedule, please feel free to respond when it is best for you. I operate on “disability time” and may respond quickly to your email, or I may take some time to respond. Thank you for your patience and understanding.”

Readers are welcome to use or modify this statement if it helps you. I also rely a great deal on “body-doubling” or co-working with colleagues to help hold myself accountable to different project deadlines, and to help boost my interest in a topic when my energy or motivation has been waning. Lastly, I have started introducing discussions of “access needs” into my group meetings, along with check-ins for general well being. I believe everyone has access needs, whether we’re disabled/neurodivergent or not. This could look like everyone saying that their accessibility needs are being met in that space, but creating a little room to talk about everything from seating to harsh lighting to how hungry or tired we are can help normalize dialogue that pushes against the constant productivity expectations of academia. We are human first, and scientists second.

J Marquardt: Co-working keeps me accountable in my writing. I also write down everything on to-do lists and prioritize or it does not get done. One thing that helps tremendously is just the ability to turn the lights off in my office. The fluorescent lighting is a constant struggle for me. I do have glasses with tinted lenses that I wear sometimes. I joke with students that I am not trying to be “cool” or a “rock star” and explain I use them to help with migraines. Simply being able to close the office door, or put in my loops can help with overstimulation.

Related to the last prompt, have you used stim toys/concentration devices or practices during meetings, classes, etc.? How did they help you, and why do you think their use should be normalized in academic settings?

A Schulz: A work colleague and I developed a toolkit for creating fantastic figures and we present this GitHub repository (<https://github.com/nrokh/ScientificFigures>) to a group of 30–40 PhD students every year. This past year, I was able to get all participants to have therapy clay of five different stiffnesses ranging from very soft to very stiff. Each of the students got to use the therapy clay (neurodivergent identify-

ing or not) for the 3-h training. All of the students remained very focused and several commented after the training that it helped them focus and fidget and it was nice that everyone in the classroom was doing it. Clay is a moldable medium so everyone can be their own creative explorers. With how successful this was I also now have some of this therapy clay for the weekly meetings I run with the graduate students I collaborate with. I think having fidget options all the time helps. It is also critical that these fidget devices are quiet and minimize distraction, but they can make people’s hands feel strange after playing with the clay. . .so I always bring some hand sanitizer for people to use afterward if they would like.

N. Bressman: I have been stimming for as long as I can remember, back to elementary school when I used to pick at the irregularities on the plastic chairs with my fingernails while I sat through lessons. I found these behaviors to be inexplicably calming, but also necessary to keep my hands occupied and absorb my extra mental bandwidth while trying to focus so that I didn’t get more distracted from the lessons in other ways. Later, a compulsive stim I picked up a while ago was playing with my hair, which resulted in me unintentionally plucking them out repeatedly throughout the day. Eventually, this led to my hair thinning in parts during graduate school, so I grew a beard and shifted to pulling out beard hairs instead because whenever I got down to a bald spot on my beard, I could shave it down and start over more easily than my head. However, this was still not ideal and I am very fortunate for the rise in various stim devices in recent years, which I have found to be particularly successful in reducing my hair picking tendencies. I find rotating and changing my fidget devices periodically keeps them engaging enough to the point that I have not needed to shave off my beard in a long time. In particular, I have found that fidget devices that can be used in multiple different ways and have a mild pain stimulus like a spiky portion are especially effective to replace self-destructive stimming behaviors. It would be great to not have to stim and fidget, but these behaviors are involuntary. Normalizing the use of stim devices would likely help other neurodivergent folks reduce stress and avoid more self-destructive behaviors such as nail biting and skin picking.

T. Cronin: I wear fidget rings daily and utilize stim toys often if they are available. I have found fidget rings to be some of the most beneficial for me as they provide me with something to fidget with while also maintaining a level of discreteness that does not distract others. Personally, I believe they should be normalized, as academia is all about the pursuit of knowledge so it seems silly to me to hinder that pursuit due to societal norms. I would also add that I am almost always wear-

ing headphones and listening to music when I am working as well, unless there is something requiring me to be listening. Although it often is not viewed in a positive light by everyone else, I believe it is something that should be normalized in the academic setting. I have found it helps regulate my emotions, but also boosts my productivity, both of which are heavily supported benefits of listening to music in scientific literature.

J. Marquardt: It is usually moving for me. I do not sit or stand still for any length of time. When sitting I will get up and stand, stretch, or sway at the back of the room. When I teach, I am constantly in motion. I also use fidget rings and have a variety of fidget toys on my desk for anyone to use. I think this should be normalized so folks do not feel weird or “other,” especially as it can help with concentration and productivity. I do try to normalize this in my classroom and specifically invite students to feel free to engage in moving, fidgets, etc., saying I myself am never still.

T. Lepore: I often need to stand, move, or rub at my legs while I’m in a long meeting or class. I also rub my face which leads people to occasionally ask if I’m feeling alright or if I’m tired; I just move my body in different ways to shake out a little energy. While many people “stim” or engage in self-stimulating behaviors like fidgeting, it tends to be more common in our neurodivergent communities. I’ll echo that normalizing movement and other stimming behaviors can really help people feel less, well, weird, or out of place for engaging in them.

A. Tissot: When I was in my classes, they weren’t very common unfortunately. However, there was an instance when I was training for a new job position and there were many stim toys available for our use and I loved it! They are very helpful, and I absolutely believe that normalizing their presence would help people be more present in class. With my brain, I feel that I need a sort of “anchor” to help ground me so that I can focus and use my brain effectively and stim toys (as well as music or a movie) can serve that purpose.

B. Shanafelt: Prior to this conference, I hadn’t seriously considered this topic for me personally, but reflecting back now I realize that I absolutely benefit from a subconscious fidget—that is, my beard. It feels weird to say it, but having something to do with my hands absolutely allows more sustained attention. Working with High School students, I have the unique opportunity to see the focus impact of a variety of fidgets, and while some can be clear distractions, they can significantly improve focus. I will absolutely jump to the defense of the normalization of fidgets in all scenarios from K-12 education to post-secondary to professional careers and beyond. Whether it’s clay, a stuffed chicken nugget, a Rubik’s cube or yes, a beard—there is immense

value in fidgets that should absolutely be integrated in academia.

“Neurodivergent burnout” is unique to neurodivergent individuals and is separate from general burnout. For example, “autistic burnout” occurs when an autistic person has reached a threshold of stress and overstimulation to the point of exhaustion and loss of function (Arnold et al. 2023; Higgins et al. 2021). Have you experienced neurodivergent burnout in relation to your time in academia? What strategies did you use to support yourself through burnout?

B. Fitzwater: I have been in some stage of burnout for several years, I would say since high school. However, it has waxed and waned over the years. It has been an active struggle to battle burnout, and I do not have all the answers (I wish I did!). At its worst, my neurodivergent burnout manifests as me losing the ability to speak coherently, becoming more forgetful, losing interest in everything but sleep, and barely having energy to make food or eat and feeling incredibly low and drained. After therapy and self-work, I have learned that I have to prioritize my needs not as superficial wants, but as actual needs. I am still learning to self-advocate and give myself what I need, but setting specific times to engage in my special interests or things I enjoy has helped pull me out of my more severe burnout stages. For example, creating art tends to help me feel a lot more in tune with myself and boosts my mood. However, this is not the case for everyone and it may take time for you to find out what helps you to replenish your spoons and recover from burnout.

N. Bressman: I have found that to-do lists help me avoid burnout. Whenever I feel like I am getting burned out, I write a to-do list of everything I still need to get done. Then, I read the list and often think to myself, “that really isn’t that much” when I realize most things on the list will not take much time. Or, if it is a lot, I start chipping away at it in manageable bits until I notice progress and see the list get smaller and closer to being done. Also, establishing a work-life balance significantly helps. Work stays at work so that I can decompress. Those emails I see at 6 p.m. can wait until the next day. Additionally, I make sure to have things that I enjoy on my calendar at all times so that I always have something to look forward to, which helps me avoid burnout. Whether it is a concert, fishing trip, or hanging out with friends, it helps having those “destinations” to show to myself that there are “recharge checkpoints” coming up soon.

A. Tissot: Ha, absolutely yes. I struggled greatly with burnout for years, especially pre-diagnosis. I honestly

still haven't figured out the best way to avoid burnout, but once I understood my brain better I was able to better advocate for myself and express my needs. I had to figure out what I was capable of balancing and unfortunately it meant a lot of components of my life (including socializing) were greatly reduced. However, letting myself recharge and prioritizing my alone time are really important, as well as making plans and preparing for situations as well as I can. I never fully escaped the burnout, I'm certainly still recovering from it, but I think if I had started graduate school with a better understanding of my brain, then I might have been able to better pace myself and create reasonable expectations.

T. Cronin: Yes definitely. For a year or two, I was in neurodivergent burnout, primarily right when I was diagnosed with some of my conditions and was learning to deal with them. It was a great struggle as most did not understand what I was going through, and I had deadlines and other work to do. I will say what helped me by spending a lot of time alone to recharge, although I may not be the best to provide strategies as my work style is basically work to near burnout and then rest due to still learning to recognize when my body is telling me I need rest. Even as I write this, I am just returning after needing to rest for a few days after nearly reaching burnout.

B. Shanafelt: The term "Neurodivergent burnout" is admittedly new to my lexicon. While I am uncertain if the burnout I experience is tied to my ADHD or not, I have experienced it in many instances both inside and outside academia. It can be progressive (building over the course of several days/weeks) or immediate (appearing in the middle of class or a study session). The latter is typically more disruptive. The healthy way I manage this is intentionally stepping away for a few minutes. As a student this can be difficult, but the cost-benefit analysis I conduct starts with the realization that I need to take care of myself in order to function (Noltemeyer et al. 2012) for the remainder of the class or study session. I've also found intentional breath control and mental re-centering practices to work as well.

Science *in situ*: Successes and struggles during biology fieldwork

Fieldwork is often exhausting, stressful, and difficult to navigate (Osborne et al. 2025), and it can place an even greater strain on neurodivergent biologists who may have reduced access to safe foods, disability aids, routine, and their normal support system. Biology often pushes a "superhuman" ideal within the field that celebrates struggle and productivity over human needs (Knutie et al. 2025), which may exacerbate the needs and strain on neurodivergent biologists. Here, we discuss

our experiences and recommendations during a pivotal part of many biology studies.

If you have conducted fieldwork, how has your neurodivergent identity helped you conduct your research? As a neurodivergent scientist, what have been some of your struggles during fieldwork season?

S. Huč: One of the ways that my neurodivergent identity has helped me in the field is that I can absolutely focus on what I'm doing, because I'm super fortunate that most of the field work that I have done is actually something that is my hyper-fixation and I'm obsessed with. I'm really able to be there in the moment and do the field work, which in my case is collecting invertebrates and trying to ID them and photograph them. I've been able to do that for hours and hours on end and not have a problem with it. It's the best thing ever, so I'm very fortunate in that sense. However, there is also a downside to that, because my main struggle with field work is actually listening to my bodily needs. I will completely forget that I should maybe drink or get food or take a break. Some of the field work has involved sitting over buckets and picking out tiny, tiny invertebrates as they crawl along the sides. I have had really bad backaches because of that before and it's just something that I need to be better about reminding myself. It's really difficult to pull away from such an activity during field work probably because of my neurodivergent identity when I am so hyperfocused and interested. There is also the fact of people pleasing when doing field work. The thought of "oh, this person is really happy that I am doing all of this field work," or, "I'm the only one left still doing this field work." I feel like I need to keep continuing so somebody is doing the field work, and not recognizing that maybe there's a reason people have taken a break, and I should too.

A. Tissot: Invertebrate zoology is a special interest of mine, and I truly believe that helped me in learning about the ecosystems I worked in. I was always so excited and wanted to understand how things worked and it drove me to explore more and more. On the other side, my biggest struggles were juggling multiple things. Having to work in tidally influenced sites was always challenging, as it took a lot of my energy and focus away from the fieldwork itself. I also tend to ignore my needs when I am in a fieldwork setting in order to take the best advantage of the limited time. This means once I reach my threshold I will continue to work past it in order to get the work done so I don't feel the trip was wasted, which further contributes to burnout.

C. Brothers: For me, the most fun part of my research is the fieldwork in which I get to go out and observe and

collect the animals I'm studying, which is where my hyperfocus tends to kick in. Once I get going, it's easy to work consistently all day as long as what I'm doing is interesting to me. This is a double edged sword; however, in that, I also tend to forget the little things when hyper focused, and my biggest struggle becomes making sure the equipment comes along with me. It's easy for me to get distracted in the process of loading and to forget the small but important things that aren't immediately on my mind or in my sight (water, sunscreen, miscellaneous adapters for cameras, etc). I even once forgot my net and mesh cage for field work catching insects.

M. Wyatt: When I have conducted fieldwork, my neurodivergent perspective has often been an asset in ways that may seem counterintuitive. While I find sustained focus on a single, repetitive task challenging, I tend to do very well in broader, more management-oriented roles in the field. I am often the person who naturally keeps track of many small details at once. In practice, this means I am highly attuned to what is happening around the field team. I am quick to notice changes in weather conditions, shifts in group dynamics, or early signs that someone may be experiencing heat exhaustion or fatigue, sometimes before they recognize it themselves. That constant situational awareness allows me to help identify potential issues early and advocate for the health and safety of the team. Although I may not be best suited for tasks that require long periods of uninterrupted focus, I bring care, awareness, and compassion to field settings. I see these complementary strengths as part of what makes diverse field teams effective, since different cognitive styles contribute to both productivity and well-being in challenging environments.

T. Lepore: I just want to share a struggle that I was afraid to open up about for a very long time, and I want to voice it to the room. What I now know is part of my neurodivergence in general, is something I identified with very early on in my career, and that is agoraphobia, which is an oversensitivity to many things—that could be a crowded room, crowded spaces, or big open spaces. And early on in my career, I started pursuing vertebrate paleontology and field work, and I thought for sure that I would never be able to do anything in paleontology, because of this fixation on fieldwork being the necessary thing, one of the necessary things in paleontology. There are a lot of big open spaces in paleontology field work. And so I'll just mention I resonate with a lot of the things that have helped, especially as M. Wyatt was sharing, the compassion and the checking on other people, very much like a nurturer in that way, in the field. I tend to do that. However, when it comes to my own walking around in the field and prospecting and looking for fossils, I have a really hard time being out of eyesight of

other people, and asking for help with it. And I think for a long time, I thought that was a personal failing. So, I just want to voice that there are many anxiety-disorder related things and neurodivergent related things that, again, coming back to that medical or individual model, make us feel like there's something wrong with us, when all we need to do is ask for help. And nine times out of 10 people are like, "Sure, I'll walk with you." Or, "of course, I'll come with you," but there's a sense of "I need to do this by myself to be a 'real scientist.'"

B. Fitzwater: I absorb what I see in the field like a sponge and notice little details that others may miss, and this has helped me later with interpretations of our findings. During one of my first field outings, I created a full document of my own personal observations, not as part of the research but for myself to learn and connect with the science. I crave watching animals behave in their natural habitat, it's like an itch I have to scratch. I also have a very strong drive to complete something once I have started it and can power through often longer than my peers. However, I have a documented slower processing speed as I have mentioned previously, which has been negatively perceived multiple times in the field. When I saw the documentation for the first time during my diagnosis, I cried. I had gone years thinking I was incompetent, and no matter how hard I tried, I could never catch up to the speed of everyone else. As an autistic person, I also struggle in the field with my routine being different, lack of my safe foods, fear of judgement of others when my burnout symptoms appear (particularly because I begin slurring words/have difficulty with complete sentences), and sensory issues. Like T. Lepore and M. Wyatt mentioned, I also take on a nurturing role in the field and like to check in with the team or provide frequent breaks. However, I have been guilty of staying up later than others or waking up early to start doing a ton of work to help ensure that no one else on the team is overworked besides me. I also felt guilty for my "slowness" and tried to overcompensate by working at all hours so I didn't slow the team down. I would even skip meals or eat too little or quickly just so I could "catch up." This is not healthy, and in future fieldwork outings I plan to better spread the load and take everyone's needs and rest, including my own, into consideration. I need to practice what I preach and let others tell me what they need rather than overcompensating up front and deciding for them!

N. Bressman: Something my neurodivergent identity helps me with during fieldwork is helping me develop a sort of encyclopedic-like knowledge, where I basically retain a field guide in my head. This can be very convenient because I can be out in the field and I'm like, "oh, that's this bird, that's this plant, that's this fish." I developed this mental field guide through various hyperfix-

ations. I have always hyperfixated on fish and wanted to learn everything about them, but recently, I have also hyperfixated on birds and plants through becoming a homeowner, so I learned everything about every bird or plant I could possibly find on my property. Now, this knowledge is extremely handy when I am teaching natural history. I also find that due to my special interests, I have no problem being out in the field for very long periods of time, doing strenuous activities covered in animal guts and whatnot as long as I am interested in the work.

Additionally, while I am hypervigilant about my students' safety and wellbeing when interacting with people in the field, I have unknowingly put myself in harm's way in the past by not appropriately reading social cues. Fortunately, nothing bad has actually happened to me in the field and I have been able to nervously laugh my way through these situations. However, in hindsight, going 100 miles offshore beyond cell service to collect specimens with non-scientist strangers I met on the internet and knew nothing about could have ended poorly. I certainly would not let my students put themselves in situations that I have unknowingly put myself into for their own safety.

T. Cronin: I personally love field work and for the past roughly two years, I have been conducting field work twice a week every week. I feel my neurodivergent identity has contributed to my ability to conduct research in the field in a multitude of ways. One of the primary ways is that being out in nature provides a calm, non-judgmental, and stimulating environment that allows me to recharge and get a break from sensory overload. The benefits provided by being in nature help drive me to conduct projects that require frequent and extensive research that would be unappealing to many others. In addition to this, nature is unpredictable causing challenges and issues to arise when conducting fieldwork. While many find these challenges and issues to be an annoyance and may sway them away from field work, these actually are part of the excitement that makes me love doing it. My flavor of neurodivergence is unique in a sense, it causes me to see challenges or issues as puzzles that I need to solve and it allows me to thrive in chaos. Due to this, the unpredictable challenges and issues in field work, often that require urgent solutions, allows me to work at my best and allows my mind to be calm and focused, often more so than when I am working in the lab. Although my identity as a neurodivergent scientist has helped me in multiple ways, there are also many counteracting struggles that can make this a challenge. One being that the fieldwork puts a lot of physical stress on my body, as between my normal physical activities and my field work I often will walk and hike 200–300 miles in a month, often while lugging heavy equipment around. This often leads me to pushing my body too

far and injuring myself/requiring multiple days of rest. While needing a few days rest may not pose a problem to many, due to my responsibilities to my research students (being the one that drives and goes to the field with them), weekly sampling design, and busy schedule, this need for multiple days rest can be problematic.

C. Spear: My neurodivergence has definitely helped in field work. I've been called a "boy scout," always positively, because of how prepared I am for anything to happen. Since I often think of far too many possibilities I am often overprepared. At the same time, I keep in mind the size of my pack and only take things that can solve multiple problems, with a few exceptions of small items that may only have an important singular use.

What strategies have helped you during your fieldwork?

B. Fitzwater: Build in as much routine as you possibly can. Make dedicated time to yourself to help you regulate, and make this a priority. This may look like waking up earlier to have an extra hour to yourself, or it may look like playing a portable gaming system, taking photographs, meditating, or whatever helps you. Give yourself grace by reminding yourself that fieldwork is stressful, and it is normal to get overstimulated or even irritable. With that said, it is ultimately your responsibility to take the breaks or steps you need to ensure that you can self-regulate in a healthy way. If you are in a safe space to do so, then let your colleagues know that you are neurodivergent and what accommodations you may need. You can still let them know what you need if you don't feel comfortable enough disclosing your identity. If you are the leader of the research team, then provide written instructions or a protocol beforehand if possible for each task to be performed and meet with the collaborators to explain what expectations you have, how you plan to conduct fieldwork, and the goals of the trip. If you can, then practice the techniques beforehand. Be generous with answering questions—many neurodivergent individuals need to ask several clarifying questions that may sound superficial to you but are integral to the neurodivergent researcher's internal algorithm. All of the strategies may benefit the entire team, not just neurodivergent individuals, and can help you better achieve your fieldwork goals.

A. Tissot: Spreading out the responsibilities was always helpful. Rather than me being the sole leader of the fieldwork, each of us helped make sure we stayed on track and paid attention to the time and pacing of things. Additionally, making a detailed plan while also taking time to prepare myself for things to go wrong (because they will), and lowering my expectations while keeping my goals in sight. Earlier in my field I felt field-

work was life and death, it took me far too long to fully accept that nature does what it wants and science needs to accommodate it, *not the other way around*. Ultimately, your safety and needs are key, and advocating for yourself *does not* make you a bad scientist. If anything, then it will make you better.

T. Cronin: Honestly, what I have found has helped me the most is consistently going to the field every week and having others that are working with me. Having a consistent field schedule provides me time away from sensory overload and allows me to recharge my social battery, which in turn allows me to have the energy to teach more effectively and complete lab work more efficiently. However, I will admit that the weekly fieldwork can serve as a double edged sword if there is no flexibility in the day and time of the field work, as it does not allow me the ability or time to rest when I am experiencing mental health flare ups or physical/mental overload. One of the most important things that has helped me and has allowed me to do fieldwork is having someone else with me. In relation to my flavor of neurodivergence, I have found having undergraduates who I am responsible for taking out to do fieldwork has made it much easier for me to complete my fieldwork as one of the struggles I have as a neurodivergent person is doing things for myself. It has always been much easier for me to complete tasks or do things if it is to the benefit of others. In relation to my minority identities, having someone in the field with me has also been beneficial in helping me succeed in fieldwork. One of the primary reasons is the added safety having someone else with you provides. Fieldwork trips in general always have multiple risks for injury, either from the landscape (i.e., falling trees, falling from heights) or the natural inhabitants (i.e., snake bites, large mammal attacks), and often are in places where contacting others or getting help may be challenging. Having someone else with you provides security in that help is within reach in the event something occurs. However, it also provides safety and a second set of eyes and ears to unique challenges many minorities face in the field. In my experiences in the field, I have had many encounters that have made me uncomfortable and worried for my safety, ranging from people following me to random individuals trying to get me to go with them to secluded unknown places. While I cannot say if there was any actual safety risk in these situations, having someone in the field with me provided me with someone else who saw these encounters and could confirm them.

T. Lepore: Fieldwork is always subject to sudden changes. However, having a rough plan or agenda for fieldwork that is shared with all participants and leaders, and which includes regular check-ins for mental health, bathroom breaks, and general well being, can be a huge

asset. Normalize asking for help when we need it; not everyone will be ready or able to engage in fieldwork in the same exact ways. This includes discussions of general field safety, identity-based safety, and protocols for interacting within our field camp and with members of outside community we may engage with along the way. If someone on your team is able to lead a discussion on these topics while in the field, then that's all to the better, so there are regular expectations of these kinds of check-ins. I think this helps everyone, not just neurodivergent people, feel safer, more prepared, and more welcome in field settings.

How can colleagues or team leaders better support you or other neurodivergent scientists in fieldwork settings?

N. Bressman: They can proactively ask us of our needs in the field, instead of putting the burden on neurodivergent people to be forthcoming with their identities and needs. This would help accommodate everyone on the field team, not just neurodivergent individuals, and immediately serve to create a welcoming atmosphere and establish clear lines of communication. Additionally, they can be direct and literal with communication to reduce ambiguity, given many neurodivergent people think very literally. I remember one time I was deboarding a large research vessel onto a small boat and was told to "hop on down" by a superior. So, I literally hopped off the large vessel several feet down onto the small boat and was immediately scolded for doing something dangerous. I was confused because I was just following directions exactly as they were given to me, but if the superior had said "climb on down" like they had meant, I would have climbed down.

T. Lepore: Having field safety and protocol expectations as I mentioned above is a good starting place. I agree with N. Bressman that we can be more aware and proactive as leaders, and if we're participants, have our team leadership start the discussion on various accessibility needs in the field, with feedback from participants themselves. When we're out in the field, team leaders can ensure that there are support people at the front and back of any line of hikers or field surveyors, so no one feels too badly that they're left behind or rushing ahead.

T. Cronin: One thing that I think would help team leaders who have scientists, neurodivergent or neurotypical, working under them is to be transparent about what the field work entails, potential hazards and risks that could happen, as well as what animals you may encounter (many people have phobias or fears of animals and they should know if they may encounter them). This transparency will be of great help to many neurodivergent individuals as it will help them understand their

role in the field as well as the logic behind why things are being done, ultimately decreasing the likelihood of mistakes occurring due to miscommunication. However, I believe this is good practice in general, even if neurotypical individuals may not receive the same help from this information as some neurodivergent people, clearly laying things out allows everyone to make an informed decision about joining in field work or joining a research team, which in turn may reduce future conflict or challenges that may slow the efficiency of work.

C. Brothers: Most of my field work in recent years has been done alone or with me at the helm, and given my proclivity to forget things when they're out of sight, I always take time to coordinate with my field team ahead of trips and create a shared list of necessary equipment. I also always try to pack equipment at least a day in advance, be that in the vehicle or in an established number of bags/containers so it's one less obstacle to getting started. Lastly, I try to make sure to outline the plan, what roles need to be filled, when to check in with each other, and what health considerations (water, sunscreen, etc.) need to be considered, to ensure nobody is uncomfortable or unaccounted for.

A. Tissot: Be more receptive to individual needs. Each person is likely to have different challenges in fieldwork settings, which can also vary greatly depending on the location itself. If you are a team leader, advisor, or supervisor, then validate your students or employees and help them take care of their needs. Making them feel guilty for having needs is not only ridiculous, it is not supportive of a healthy research environment and should be taken as seriously as any other safety parameters.

Moving forward: How can we create more inclusive spaces for neurodivergent biologists at all levels?

In this final section, we discuss strategies, action items, and recommendations to create spaces that create more equitable and inclusive lab, classroom, and departmental spaces for neurodivergent biologists to operate.

What do you see as the most pertinent barriers to neurodivergent academics currently?

B. Fitzwater: First, from within the community we need to be inclusive of more than just autism and ADHD, and we need to take more intersectional approaches that include marginalized voices. More broadly, there is a lack of resources available to students, professors, and departments. Students do not know what resources are available, and there is a lack of awareness of neurodiversity broadly, particularly in that it can manifest on a spectrum. As others have referenced in this roundtable

discussion, many neurodivergent identities are stereotyped and thus neurotypicals who are not familiar with neurodivergent identities may be inclined to disregard a neurodivergent biologist's request, experience, or the like because it does not fit within their own perception of the identity. Training on neurodiversity and visible resources (such as clearly posted resources on the department website) can greatly assist both neurodivergent individuals seeking resources and accommodations and neurotypical colleagues and professors.

A. Schulz: Data. We need data. Every person who identifies as neurodivergent is unique and science could have unique barriers to each individual. While there exists uniqueness, there are likely commonalities in challenges for people that hold certain identities close and many of these identities could have intersectionality with the barriers of neurodivergence. . . however, there is almost no data. I have recently moved to Germany and I have found the common traits I noticed from my neurodivergent colleagues in the USA presents differently for people from around the world. I hope that science will be funded in diverse places around the world to study some of these specific. I also think that there are medications that are very critical to supporting the mental health of some neurodivergent individuals, myself included. When I moved to Germany, the location I moved to was so inaccessible for English-speaking diagnosis that I ended up having to make a solution of flying to the USA every few months for medication (Schulz 2024). I did not realize that the experience of a neurodivergent individual could be so different in a country where it is publicly communicated that health care is universal.

A. Tissot: Stigma above all. It is difficult to advocate for yourself when you are made to feel lazy, stupid, weird, or an outsider. If we remove the stigma and focus on being more accessible and open minded, then we can begin to focus on ways to better accommodate individuals.

R. Thompson: I know that I'm not the only one who struggled with this. I feel that after COVID, there's been a lot of wonderful things happening where there's more people talking about, connecting, and understanding their relationship with neurodivergent identities. And then, there's this opposing force where people are saying, "Oh, we're over diagnosing. This isn't real. You guys must be faking it. You want attention. You want these accommodations and you just want to take advantage of a system," which, in my experience, has been a somewhat "oppressive" force. Which is a strong word, but the aforementioned anti-neurodivergent rhetoric has oppressed neurodivergent people by preventing them from getting the resources they need. Many neurotypical people downplay the neurodivergent experience.

They're saying that it isn't real, and it makes it very hard to exist as a neurodivergent person. In my experience, I'm constantly having to fend, "No, this is a real problem that I have." It's not just something that I made a TikTok [social media app that is predominantly used to create and share short-form video clips] club about, or whatever they think it is. It's hard. Especially in academia where we are expected to meet neurotypical standards. It can be difficult to get the resources we need when we are not taken seriously in the first place.

J. Galvez: I have OCD. Because the vast majority of my compulsions are mental, it's not always obvious to people, but it's something I've struggled with my whole life. I was only diagnosed about three and a half years ago as a PhD student, and something that I really struggled with when I was first diagnosed was this dichotomy between feeling so seen mentally and in my personal life—finally having so many things make sense—while simultaneously feeling very scared to be open about my neurodivergence within my institution. I decided early on to only communicate my diagnosis with a small group of people, but eventually I kept widening who I disclosed my identity to. In doing so, I was able to not only own my identity a bit more, but also connect with academic peers who also have OCD and get more visibility that I was severely lacking when I was first diagnosed. This is something that I try to pass onto my students as well: I often disclose my struggles with OCD and anxiety early on. I think a huge barrier to undergraduate students is this lack of visibility of neurodivergence in academia. I've had many students that I've mentored tell me that I am one of the first people who have been open about my neurodivergence. I think that is such a travesty, because—as we've heard today—all of our perspectives add to our science, and they're incredibly important. I think increasing visibility of neurodivergence within academia and amplifying our voices is key to ushering in the next generation of scientists that can contribute to both biological diversity with their research, and also personal and mental diversity within the field. I really hope to see that change in the future. I've been able to find some great mentors and colleagues, but I would love to have more than one or two people I can point to as examples of neurodivergence in science when students come up to me asking for mentorship and role models in this realm.

M. Wyatt: One of the most significant barriers for neurodivergent academics is how the concept of rigor is often used to justify exclusion. Inclusion and rigor are not mutually exclusive, yet rigor is frequently treated as a reason not to change existing structures, even when those structures clearly disadvantage some students and scholars. I have had many conversations where, when

advocating for accessibility for myself or others, I am told that accommodations cannot be made because they would make something "less rigorous." When I ask why rigor must take a particular form, or why it matters in that specific context, the question itself is often dismissed. This framing leaves little room to examine whether existing practices actually serve their intended goals. This pressure is especially strong in PhD programs, where a small number of high-achieving students are closely scrutinized. In those environments, students may hesitate to request accommodations out of fear of standing out or being perceived as needing extra help. If academic programs aim to train excellent scientists, then that requires supporting all students, not only those who already fit a narrow model of success. Similar dynamics exist in undergraduate education, where poor student performance is sometimes normalized or even celebrated as evidence that a course is rigorous. I find this deeply frustrating. I have been told, implicitly or explicitly, that creating accessible and supportive learning environments means my courses must be less rigorous. My experience suggests the opposite. Many students arrive in my classroom carrying stress or fear from previous courses where expectations were unclear and learning felt punitive. When those same students enter a more transparent and accommodating space, they often thrive. Using rigor as a defense against accessibility remains one of the most persistent and damaging barriers in academia.

U. Müller: I want to tag on to what M. Wyatt was saying. As a student, the biggest barrier for me was exams. Oral exams were absolute hell. Written exams were not much better. When I encounter a question that I cannot answer instantly, I freeze and take a long time to unfreeze and refocus. In conventional oral and written exams, my grades were strongly bimodal, I would either ace it or flunk it, to the detriment of my GPA and to the chagrin of my teachers, who would accost me "but I know you know this." Yeah well, now tell me again how exams are a good way for students to demonstrate proficiency? The way neurotypical people operationalize what proficiency and professional behavior looks like often excludes neurodivergent people.

Then, there is neurodivergent time. I had a high school teacher who would set three essay questions for his exams for students to choose from—a one-page essay, a take-the-full-class-period-to-write-it essay, and a take-the-whole-school-day-and-I-will-square-it-with-your-other-teachers essay. I always took the third option. Neurodivergent students don't always need extra time. It is often enough to leave the time slot open ended, and I can complete the task as fast as neurotypical students. Removing time pressure can make a big difference.

Now that I am an instructor and a full professor, my courses have no exams, I only use so-called specific grading (Leslie and Lundblom 2020), and all assignments are, or at least mirror, real-life scholarly activities, such as conducting research, critical searches and reading of published literature, scholarly writing, conference presentations, etc. I continue to find ways to not have to communicate orally to large groups. In my role as a researcher, I avoid oral presentations. At conferences, I prefer presenting posters and 3-min speed talks. In my role as instructor, I avoid oral presentations by centering student discussions and -presentations; I have stopped lecturing almost entirely.

Yet, written-exam situations continue to haunt me. In school, we had exams, in academia, we have publications. And just like exams, academic publishing is extremely normative. It disadvantages English-additional language writers and readers, and it enforces majority cultural norms of constructing arguments and narratives (Khartite and Zerhouni 2016; Canagarajah 2022). I would posit that it also disadvantages neurodivergent writers and readers, and not only those with learning disabilities such as dyslexia. There are many scientists who do amazing work yet struggle to get their work published in academic journals.

Many academic skills are well-aligned with the strength conferred by autism and ADHD, such as pattern recognition, allowing neurodivergent scholars to see unconventional new connections and synergies; and the ability to hyperfocus, allowing neurodivergent scholars to dedicate long hours of extended effort to time- and effort-consuming tasks. Yet, the academic reward structure is poorly aligned with the needs of neurodivergent scientists. The academic career path is full of competitive, high-stakes events from undergraduate and graduate school to job applications and the tenure-track process. Take job applications. How many of us get reference letters that contain phrases like “Ignore their performance during the interview because I promise you that this person is phenomenally suited for this position, they just don’t interview well”? Autistic and ADHD people have much to contribute, not only through their scholarly abilities such as pattern recognition and hyperfocus, but also through their different emotional abilities (Quinde-Zlibut *et al.* 2021), which leads autistic adults to be overrepresented in care-giver professions and underrepresented in professions such as economics and finance, which are built in exploitation (Goldfarb *et al.* 2024).

T. Lepore: Academia, as a whole, is not built to expect, understand, or support people who fall outside of the privileged few, which is deliberate and built on a long history of elitism and eugenics (Dolmage 2017). I want to shout from all the rooftops in the world that

this system is one giant barrier for so many people, including disabled and neurodivergent people. When we seek support, we are too often met with language that asks us to “prove” our needs and expectations of “rigor” that uphold elitist standards. When we try to advocate for ourselves, we are too often met with language that is surprised to find disabled/neurodivergent people in academic spaces, or told that we (or our students) must be taking advantage of a system, just to get our basic needs met. The current political language around “meritocracy” in the USA, and the dismantling of funding for disabled people, only echoes this same exclusionary and exceptionalist system. We need to listen to the voices and experiences of neurodivergent people, those who are in academia and those for whom academia will never be accessible, including many individuals with high access needs or those who will never be the target audience for colleges and universities. We have a huge amount of privilege ourselves, in being able to communicate our ideas and suggestions in an academic paper, and to know where and how to publish it—so let’s see who else we can invite to the table.

How can departments, lab groups, and collaborators create more inclusive spaces for neurodivergent academics?

N. Bressman: They can set clear, explicit expectations and guidelines, especially if there are unspoken social expectations. Vagueness and uncertainty can be extremely anxiety-inducing for people like me that prefer some structure. For example, if I ask for feedback and somebody says, “if you just do a good job, you will be fine,” that can be very frustrating because how “good” does what I do need to be to be considered “good job”? Oftentimes with unclear expectations, people like me will do the maximum amount of effort to ensure that what we are doing is satisfactory. This may make us appear like overachievers by consistently producing high-quality work, but in reality, it is exhausting to spend 20 h working on something to “do a good job” when 1 h would have been sufficient. Given this often results in a higher workload, neurodivergent people in academia burnout at higher rates than our peers (Bressman *et al.* 2026). Neurodivergent people also often have difficulty with understanding tone, nuance, sarcasm, and various other aspects of social interactions, so please just be straight-forward and direct with communication. Tell us explicitly what we need to know before we need to know it instead of criticizing us after the fact for not knowing something that was not even on our radar.

J. Galvez: This might be a note for universities and institutions as a whole over individual departments, but there needs to be a complete overhaul of how accom-

modations are granted for neurodivergent students. It is virtually impossible in many places to receive accommodations without very specific documentation—often formal diagnoses or records from a medical and/or psychiatric professional. This can be a huge hurdle for students, especially undergraduates who are navigating these large academic institutions for the first time. Not to mention that those most affected by their identities may not have the time, energy, physical resources, mental resources, etc. to jump through all the paperwork hoops. There needs to be a wider range of what's considered acceptable "documentation" of neurodivergence, including personal testimonies, letters from past teachers and mentors, and alternative forms of documentation submission (i.e., oral testimony over written). This is by no means a comprehensive list, and I'm sure there are many other unique ideas that will further inclusivity.

A. Tissot: Include neurodivergence and other disabilities in training for students and professors in all departments, and even more, hold panels *featuring* people with these identities that are willing to share their experiences so we're not just hearing from folks who are speculating about our needs. I also think breaking away from standardized class structures and allowing for more creativity and flexibility would be immensely helpful.

B. Fitzwater: Departmental training about working with neurodivergent peers and students is incredibly necessary. Many individuals do not know what terms are ableist, or they mistake clarifying questions as challenges to authority, for example. Many instructors or professors are not trying to be ableist or disaffirming to neurodivergent individuals, and training can help build awareness that leads to creating more inclusive spaces, greater retention, and more positive research and educational outcomes.

What would you say to young neurodivergent scientists who are just joining the field?

N. DesJardins: There is a place for you here! We need your passion, talents, and unique ways of thinking about the world. A diversity of personalities, experiences, and approaches to solving problems among scientists is vital to scientific progress. Also—show up as your authentic self, not as who you think you should be. There is no one right way to be a scientist, and we will accept you as you are.

N. Bressman: Stick with it! Seeing the passion of young, neurodivergent scientists find their space in academia fuels me up and motivates me to keep making these spaces more inclusive and supportive. Even a few years ago, these topics were not discussed as nearly as much as they are today and I have seen great strides be made to make a supportive neurodivergent community

that was not around when I was in school. Find this neurodivergent community around you as fast as you can, even if it is online or outside of academia, and your sense of belonging will see dramatic improvements. If there is not such a community established, then work to create the community you want to see to help out other folks like you, which I have found to be very rewarding.

A. Tissot: You're not alone. And your abilities are likely unique and will allow you to make grand and unique contributions to the field. Work on learning more about your brain and your needs so you can accommodate yourself and ask for accommodation from others. And more than anything, seek out community in a way that you are comfortable with. Together we are so much stronger.

S. Huć: I very much recommend looking into the labs or other spaces you want to join by reaching out to current students or staff to see what the work environment is like. As neurodivergent people, we each have our own preferences of work style, and it can really help to find out in advance if the place you are choosing to go to can be accommodating to your needs. It is helpful to anyone, I think, to try and find out if the work environment seems like it will be a good fit for you.

J. Galvez: Above all else, make sure to find good mentors who value you as both a scientist and a human being. Surround yourself with supportive people you can be honest with, especially during times of difficulty. This applies to any new scientists joining the field, but I think it's particularly important for neurodivergent folks who may struggle with deadlines, academic "rigor," time management, burnout, and other challenges directly related to their identities. You want advisors who will be in your corner and advocate for you always, not only when you're performing well!

C. Brothers: The ambiguous nature of how to acquire accommodations can make accessing them hard when they're needed, especially for those fearful of the stigma that can come from formal diagnoses of neurodivergence. Additionally, many traditional formal stepping stones for graduate students, such as the qualifying exam or other oral exams, can have very subjective structure or guidelines depending on the committee members. As many have echoed, vague, unclear guidelines often result in anxiety-fueled endeavors that exceed the necessary investment, or sometimes even miss the mark in spite of the effort. Long, unstructured, or high-stress situations also make it very difficult for me to maintain the mask of normalcy that usually comes subconsciously, and oral exams are the perfect storm of all of them. As J. Galvez emphasized in a previous prompt, more transparent guidelines for accommodations and how to implement them in those ambiguous

formats such as qualifying exams can alleviate undue stress and provide a sense of inclusion. Otherwise, general community and resources in support of fellow neurodivergent individuals may be sufficient just by normalizing the way we interpret many of these unstructured expectations within academia.

U. Müller: In an ideal world, my advice when looking for your next work place would be “don’t mask” because the folks looking for a new team member need to accept you for who you are, not who you can pretend to be. Looking back at my career trajectory, I realize that my plan B advice is “be a rolling stone.” Having stayed at my current institution for more than a decade, I now know that by moving to new countries and new cities every few years, to places where I barely spoke the language and did not know anybody, I hid my neurodivergence behind the language barrier, and I could reset the clock of socially awkward interactions. In the 20 years before I settled at my current institution, I moved cities, institutions, and labs 10 times, and worked at eight universities in five countries on three continents.

S. Knutie: Find your support! My therapist has been a treasure. My community of like-minded people have been incredibly supportive. From these conversations, I have realized that I am not alone and how other people deal with their “kryptonite.”

B. Shanafelt: First and foremost, I think everyone should boldly be themselves. Don’t let others’ short-sightedness define your experiences in this field. When you show up as who you know you are, and courageously stand up for your needs in any academic or field setting, you have the potential to become an unstoppable force. Second—don’t assume others will advocate for you. You need to know what works for you, and advocate for yourself to receive those conditions, or actively pursue alternatives. Third—recognize that you are not alone. Whether a coworker in your building, an HR representative, or a friendly ear halfway across the country on a field ecologist Discord server. There is a vast network of support if you can find it. Finally—it is worth repeating. Believe in yourself! You’ll do amazing things!

B. Fitzwater: Starting your biology journey can feel very daunting and overwhelming. I started mine so burned out from high school and terrified of burning out again that I felt sick to my stomach and nearly vomited on a campus tour. But then, I entered my undergraduate years and doors and opportunities opened up that I never, ever thought would be available to me. I did not know I was autistic back then, and it took years before I even felt safe enough to admit to myself that I had anxiety, but with time, you learn and grow, and what you once tried to hide you may later be able to embrace warmly. You can make it in this field. Think you aren’t good enough at math to be a biologist? I nearly

failed Calculus and did very poorly on the math portion of my GRE, but I still was able to successfully complete a PhD. You are not alone, there are other neurodivergent people here in this field who, likely, have had similar experiences to yours. Find out what strategies and resources work for you, and don’t be afraid to experiment (you are a scientist, after all!). Find the people who support, encourage, and can help you. If you have a negative experience with one person or class, then there are others out there who will welcome and accept you into their biology spaces. Join communities for neurodivergent biologists (or neurodivergent people in general!). Go to conferences to further build your community. We need minds like yours to continue evolving our field and amplify the diversity of thought and approaches. There’s space for you here, and we hope that this manuscript can remind you of that.

Key recommendations and our neurodivergent lens

While we have suggested many potential changes and recommendations throughout this roundtable paper and throughout this special issue, we would like to highlight some key strategies for directly infusing our class and academic spaces with more neurodivergent perspectives and overall flexibility for all who wish to be part of biology academia:

1. Make your classroom, lab space, office, etc. a safe space where neurodivergent people are expected and respected. Normalize differences in learning and being (e.g., moving, fidget items, speaking, asking questions, and making mistakes); having transparency and clear, written expectations for all can be incredibly helpful for neurodivergent people who thrive on routine.
2. Discuss and embrace social identities in academic spaces; many humanities—and arts-centered spaces do this in academia, and we can work with interdisciplinary partners on our campuses to build more socially-aware biology spaces.
3. Provide flexible avenues for people to be present and participate within biology academic spaces. This could include Universal Design for Learning, humanizing STEM pedagogy, and culturally responsive/relevant teaching; we strongly suggest moving away from rigid exams or only one way to express or engage with learning.
4. Foster asset-based culture rather than deficit-based. Rigor does not have to be punitive.
5. Remember that neurodivergent identities, needs, and ways of knowing and being exist on a spectrum. What may work for one neurodivergent individual may not

work for another. Be flexible, and include neurodivergent voices when considering the needs of your laboratory group, classrooms, and department. Be open to learning. Neurodivergent students and peers are not a problem to solve, but rather a natural part of the diversity in thinking, experience, and being within biology spaces.

Each of these key recommendations tie back to our rationale for uplifting neurodivergent voices in biology, and the theoretical and research frameworks we acknowledge in our methods. Our reflections contribute to the literature by providing more diverse perspectives in the biosciences and STEM fields writ-large, specifically with a neurodivergent lens. With our two main theoretical frameworks in mind, Critical Disability Theory and intersectionality, we frame our neurodivergence as identity rather than pathology, and as an important component of our full intersectional identities. We underscore the boundaries of our intersectionality, primarily drawing as we are from the neurodivergent experiences of white academics and people who have remained in or adjacent to academia; this creates a potential survivorship bias and is a limitation.

Academia has a long and troubling history and current practice of ableism (Dolmage 2017), the consequences of which are seen in elitist or rigid expectations placed on academics; further, the reflections we share here do not encompass those who are non-college educated, non-academic, or otherwise not a part of the academic system. Some reflections in this paper identify and even challenge the idea of neurodivergent accommodations. We also recognize that many of the authors describe features and solutions that help them to navigate the current ableist and exclusionary academic system and other features of academia that place a band-aid on an ableist and exclusionary system. We understand that academia prioritizes power structures that creates “accommodations” which become the bare minimum for equity in an inequitable system. Academia rewards and maintains particular ableist modes of productivity, communication styles, self-management, and performance. These academic power structures ought to be interrogated, and broadcasting neurodivergent viewpoints in academia are one method to do this. Future work should continue to acknowledge interconnections between decolonial, feminist, emancipatory, neurodivergent-affirming, anti-racist, and critical theories to situate the reflections of diverse biologists (Arosoaie et al. 2026). While we cannot and do not claim to be representative of all neurodivergent biologists or neurodivergent people everywhere, we share our individual viewpoints and experiences with acknowledgement of webbed accounts and partial per-

spectives (Haraway 2013). We also want to be clear that the onus should not and cannot be on only neurodivergent or marginalized biologists to educate or perform emotional labor for their peers, nor should the responsibility to solve, research, or build foundations surrounding issues of inequality and exclusion be placed on them simply because they exist in that identity, especially when many do not receive adequate support either financially, mentally, or emotionally (Williams et al. 2019; Kinitz 2022). Rather, biologists and STEM professionals broadly should be working in community to examine, decolonize, and build spaces that nurture and cultivate greater inclusion, ways of knowing, and collaboration within academia.

Conclusions

Here, we discussed our own experiences as neurodivergent biologists in various academic spaces using structured qualitative discussion questions during both our in-person roundtable discussion at SICB 2026 and also through email communication after the conference. By sharing our various perspectives, strategies, and resources, we hope to provide our fellow neurodivergent biologists (and scientists broadly) with a sense of validation and community. Prior to our special issue in *Integrative and Comparative Biology*, there have been few perspectives on neurodivergent scientists in biology fields, and through this roundtable discussion we seek to generate conversation, provide new qualitative data, and challenge the field to include our perspectives in future literature as well as within our own departments, classrooms, and laboratory spaces and groups. Finally, through this roundtable discussion and our symposium issue, we seek to provide strategies for instructors, advisors, and departments to create more equitable and inclusive spaces that retain and celebrate a diversity of minds.

Author contributions

The manuscript was conceptualized and designed by B.M.F., who also wrote all prompts. Further conceptualization, project administration, investigation, methodology, writing—original and writing review & editing by B.M.F., A.G.T., and T.L. All other authors: investigation, writing—original draft, writing—review & editing

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Supplementary data

We provide Key Summary Points for each of the fourteen prompts in the main manuscript as supplementary data to allow readers to be able to access any key takeaways in a shorter format.

Supplementary data available at [ICB](#) online.

Conflicts of interest

U.K.M. was the editor of *Integrative and Comparative Biology* and, therefore, recused themselves from the peer review and decision-making process for this article. The authors have no other conflicts of interest to disclose.

Data availability

All of our data for this roundtable discussion are the qualitative responses of each of the authors, and therefore we do not have any other data to disclose or make available.

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