

Neurodiversity @ Mines: Voices and Vignettes

Selected Responses from Mines Students, Faculty, and Staff

(all of whom consented to having their responses shared)

<p>1 I'm autistic, which people often find surprising. I'm an honor roll student and have a strong community of friends - and that doesn't make me any less autistic. Often- times when I tell people about my disability, they respond that they "never would have known" or that I "don't seem autistic". And I recognize that the intent is positive, but what these phrases really do is show the narrow range of what people believe autism is. I've spent my whole life learning how to mask the atypical parts of who I am - but I stim, adhere to a rigid routine, and struggle in social situations.</p> <p>If given the chance, I can talk about my special interests for hours - which can be handy at Mines, given that most of them are science related. I'm also incredibly attentive to detail, have a strong memory, and think outside the box, all of which are traits that help me as an engineer. But I'm easily overwhelmed, struggle to communicate my needs, and resist change on all levels. Living in a world that isn't built for my brain is challenging in so many ways. Having a brain that works differently from most gives me a unique skill set. My autism is a major part of who I am, and embracing that has allowed me to grow into who I am today.</p>	<p>2 As a faculty member, I like how many (not all) neurodiverse students know how they learn, and they often teach me strategies that not only help them learn, but can help everyone learn.</p>
<p>3 In my brief time at Mines, it's been humbling to realize that I'm now a part of a community with perhaps the highest concentration of brainpower I've ever seen.</p> <p>I would guess that I fit squarely within that bell curve of intelligence here, but then again, the complexity of any community's neurodiversity is sold short by the mere image of a bell curve graph.</p> <p>We're more of a weird 4-D mosaic with all sorts of exotic swirling colors & patterns. Maybe that sounds hokey. But anyway, it's not only humbling, it's also exciting to meet & work with people who see the world from a different angle - we can continually learn from everyone else around us, and that's a sacred thing.</p>	<p>4 My ND primarily shows up by being overly methodical and explanatory. This is true in my personal and professional life. While this level of thoroughness and understanding of process can be very helpful in my role at Mines, I have learned to adjust my communication style for a few of my colleagues on campus so that my meaning stays clear in my communication. For example, I learned one of my colleagues doesn't read comments in parentheses (the information contained here is considered to be superfluous, and thus is nearly always ignored). This realization was really valuable for me, because I tend to include parentheticals in my correspondence (to help add context or provide additional detail). Thus, I have learned that when I'm communicating with this person, I need to make sure I find a way that all relevant information gets captured in the sentence itself, and I try to avoid using parentheses at all. This isn't a hugely negative or impactful experience, but it was an adaptation I've made that I think wouldn't have been necessary if not for my ND.</p> <p>Another tendency that I've previously ascribed to my ND is being very deliberative. I'm not a spontaneous person, and it can take me some time to make a decision on something. This is true for high-stakes decisions like, "What car should I buy," and for low-stakes ones like, "What should I order for lunch?" I had a really positive experience with a supervisor recently when they told me about a forthcoming policy change in our office before it became official. My supervisor knew this policy change would impact how I interfaced with others in the office, and they knew that the change in the office would happen in a matter of days once implemented. My supervisor recognized this preference in me and honored it by giving me the extra time and space to process this change and make a thoughtful choice about how I wanted to proceed.</p>
<p>5 One of my struggles at Mines is that I need time to process. I need meeting agendas and any questions you want my feedback on in advance. I tend to "lose my words" in these situations and struggle to speak. I know what I want to say but my brain and my mouth become disconnected. I also like to listen to music all the time. It "quiets" my brain so I can focus. If I have my earbuds in, I promise I'm not being rude. It just keeps my anxiety down and my brain focused.</p>	

6 I think I'm willing to put myself out there like that because of my neurodivergence, lack of concern for what people think of me, and ability to speak my truth regardless of who's listening, and I consider those good things. But it's very complex because there *are* social consequences, and it's those social consequences that I cannot understand and which I have no access to that keep me up at night (quite literally). I have kept my voice a little lower key since starting at Mines, because I'm trying to gauge myself and let people come to understand me gradually. I really don't want to mess this opportunity up. It's a dream job as far as I'm concerned. I'm not silencing myself or masking (I don't think?) but I'm trying to be strategic and deliberate. I worry all the time that I'm going to slip and say something that alienates me, or that I'll be "too much" for people. I think that anxiety comes from within me rather than from the people around me, and I have overall felt totally welcomed and valued in my department. So, it's a delicate balance. My neurodivergence is absolutely a strength, a superpower, and a source of inspiration and fire, but it is certainly a double-edged sword. My new role as a faculty member lets me ride both edges of the blade. It's a beautiful opportunity for my own continued personal growth and healing from past traumas, and an invitation to help students through my mentorship and the world at large through my research. I hope more people can find their voices to express these kinds of struggles in a safe space, because it is through expression and connection that we can overcome the darkest aspects of our innermost hearts and minds to find our brightest light.

7 I am a faculty member with a diagnosed neurodivergent condition. Mines is incredibly challenging to navigate due to the constantly changing systems, procedures and organizational structures; inconsistent modes of communication; poor advertisements about events; overwhelming flood of emails and last-minute deadlines. I have shared concerns around these experiences with several faculty and administrators and have experienced shaming, gaslighting and a general lack of support or empathy. We provide accommodations for our neurodiverse students, but as far as I can tell there are none whatsoever available for neurodiverse faculty. I feel like I am struggling to survive at this institution.

8 Career seminars, such as the career day prep sessions, are entirely premised on the presumption that all the students attending are neurotypical and won't have any trouble with vague instructions about body language, tone, etc. These are also given in a way that treats meeting neurotypical standards of body language and tone as good and not meeting them as bad, instead of acknowledging the arbitrary and discriminatory nature of these expectations. Career day itself is a sensory nightmare, massively overwhelming noise and chaos even if you aren't autistic, without much in the way of spaces to recover or accommodations.

9 I excelled in school and was not disruptive (or was disruptive in charming ways?) so my ADHD was not identified when I was young. I began to struggle with certain tasks as I gained new responsibilities, and my ADHD is a problem now. I was diagnosed at age 40. I am an assistant professor. I am very good at some of what I do. I struggle with other things, though. Like anyone else, I'm sure, I have positive and negative experiences with my brain and what it does. But it's not enough to talk about those! We need to identify unnecessarily rigid expectations around our work and study that are harming some of us a lot, and are difficult for many of us. What are better ways to engage, work, learn, and collaborate? How can we make it easier for anyone to ask for support and get it?

10 My neurodivergency stems from early childhood trauma leading to ADHD symptoms, so it's difficult to talk about and articulate. I also don't have the money to work with a therapist, nor do I ever want to be diagnosed since it might affect future opportunities or how I'm treated by healthcare or coworkers. I am very aware of what happens to women in particular who have a history of or diagnosis with anxiety in their quality of healthcare and treatment in the workplace. I already feel dismissed often at Mines for being a woman, so I don't think I have the luxury to be open about my struggles.

Mines students, faculty, and staff:

Would you like to add your story about neurodiversity?

Whether you are neurotypical, neurodivergent, or still trying to figure it out – all voices and perspectives are welcome!

Use the link below or QR code at right:

<https://forms.gle/JPW89AdaXX2KAXMb6>

