DESIGNING FOR NEURODIVERSITY:
Inclusive Spaces in Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

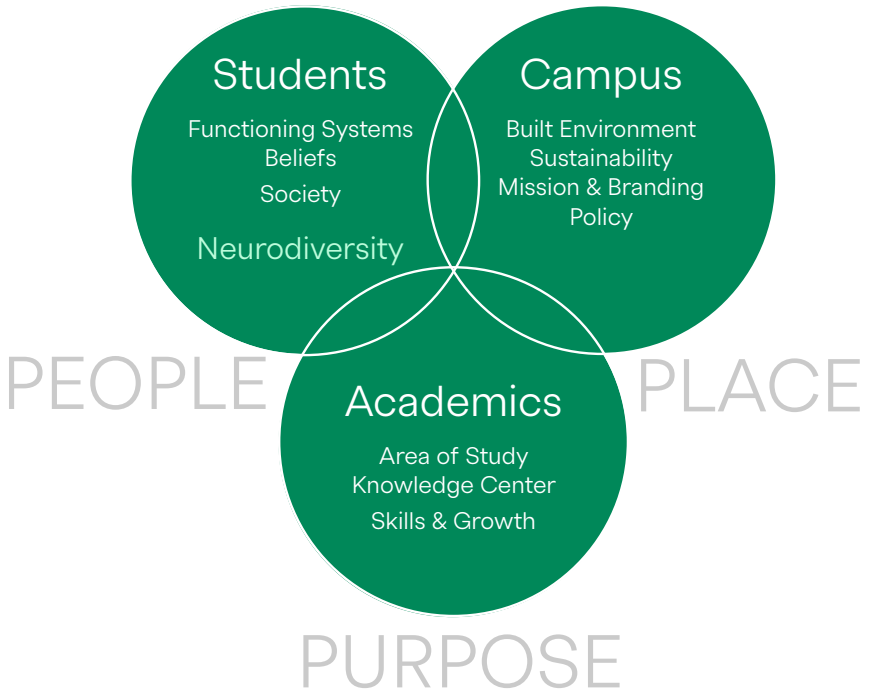
Across higher education, a quiet revolution is reshaping how we think about learning, belonging, and design. Neurodiversity recognizes that there is no single "normal" brain, and that the ways people think, learn, and experience the world are as varied and vital as the students themselves.

A July 2024 YouGov poll reports that 19% of Americans identify as neurodivergent with notable differences across age groups. 30% of adults under 30 identify as neurodivergent, compared with 6% of adults aged 65 and older. These figures demonstrate that our campuses and classrooms include individuals who perceive patterns others miss, imagine solutions from new angles, and experience the built environment through a uniquely personal lens.

As architects and designers, we shape more than buildings; we shape the conditions in which people connect, create, and thrive. Our work influences how every student—neurotypical and neurodivergent alike—interacts, learns, and feels a sense of belonging. Yet, while current codes and standards safeguard accessibility and sustainability, they often fail to consider the sensory and cognitive dimensions that influence attention, comfort, and emotional well-being.

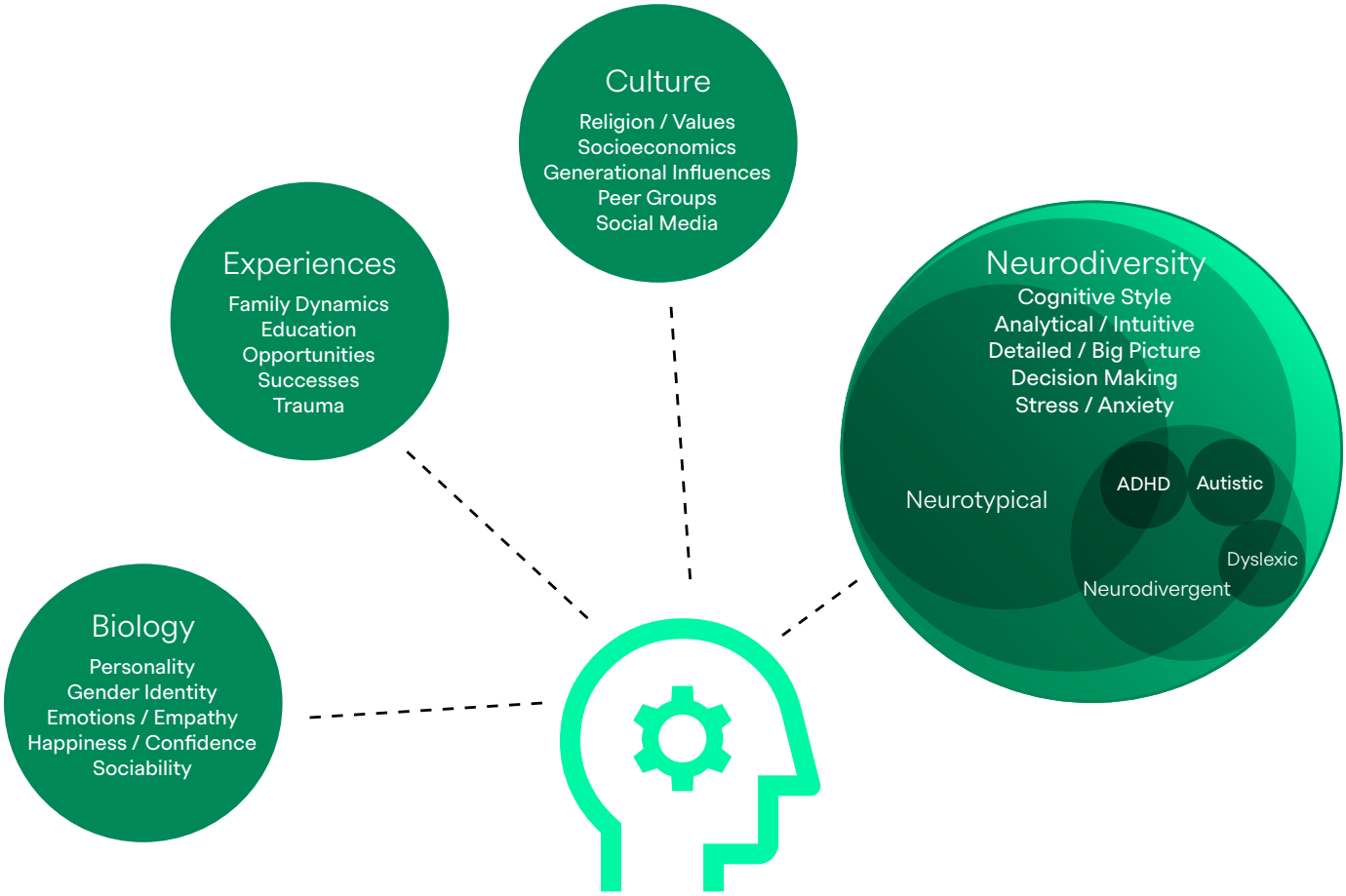
To design inclusively is to move beyond compliance and into empathy, to craft environments that respond to the full range of human experience. Neuroinclusive design transforms educational spaces into ecosystems of equity and connection, where every learner is supported not despite their differences, but because of them. When we design with every brain in mind, we build spaces that unlock human potential. This starts by understanding the concept of neurodiversity and how brain function influences human behavior, as well as how it relates to the bigger picture of higher education and learning.

The Student Experience



See diagram above: The higher education student's experience depends on how people, place, and purpose work together. Because students engage with these elements differently, their opportunities to learn will also vary. The student body is made up of individuals with diverse backgrounds, cultural context, beliefs, biological factors, and forms of neurodiversity. As a result, even when students share the same campus and coursework, they interpret and navigate their environment in distinct ways.

Perspective Factors



The student experience is unique to everyone based on their academic studies, the buildings they visit on campus, and how sensory input is perceived. The built environment does not serve a single, uniform student; rather it supports thousands of distinct nervous systems. Many students move through their day managing sensory demands—light, sound, movement, density, and visual stimuli—which can create ongoing mental and emotional strain and make self-regulation more difficult.

Learning does not happen in isolation or only within classrooms—it happens everywhere. The brain learns best when it feels safe and supported, with a deeper sense of connection. When learning environments align with how the brain works, the campus becomes more than a backdrop for education; it becomes an active partner in student success. The less mental energy students expend orienting themselves or coping with their surroundings, the more capacity they have for attentiveness, curiosity, and deeper learning. When students feel welcome and supported, they are more willing to engage, participate, and take intellectual risks.





01 UNDERSTANDING NEURODIVERSITY

Neurodiversity describes the natural variations in how human brains function and process information, encompassing differences in learning, concentration, mood, sociability, and other intellectual abilities. All minds have strengths and challenges.

Neurodivergence is understood as a state of being and an identity term that frames neurological difference as a form of natural human diversity, not a defect. It is a fundamental aspect of a person's neurological identity, which generally tends to be permanent. A neurodivergent person may also experience disability when faced with a world designed for neurotypical people, and they can certainly become ill (mentally or physically) but neurodivergence itself is not considered an illness or disability, which highlights the need for societal change and support.

Illness refers to a health condition, usually a temporary state with a specific onset and a trajectory that can be treated or cured. Disability describes the functional limitations or disadvantages that arise from interacting with an unaccommodating environment. The key distinction between neurodivergence, disability, and illness is whether the condition is a permanent aspect of brain wiring, an external barrier or functional limitation, or a temporary or treatable health state.

Neurodiversity	The concept of natural variations of human brains and minds.
Neurodivergent	A person whose brain functions differently from the majority.
Neurotypical	A person whose brain functions similarly to the majority.
Neurodiverse	A group that includes different neurotypes.
Neurodivergence	People whose brains work differently from the majority.
Neurotype	An individual's pattern of neurological functioning.
Neuroinclusive	Designing to support diverse ways of thinking, sensing, and interacting.

Most Common Neurotypes

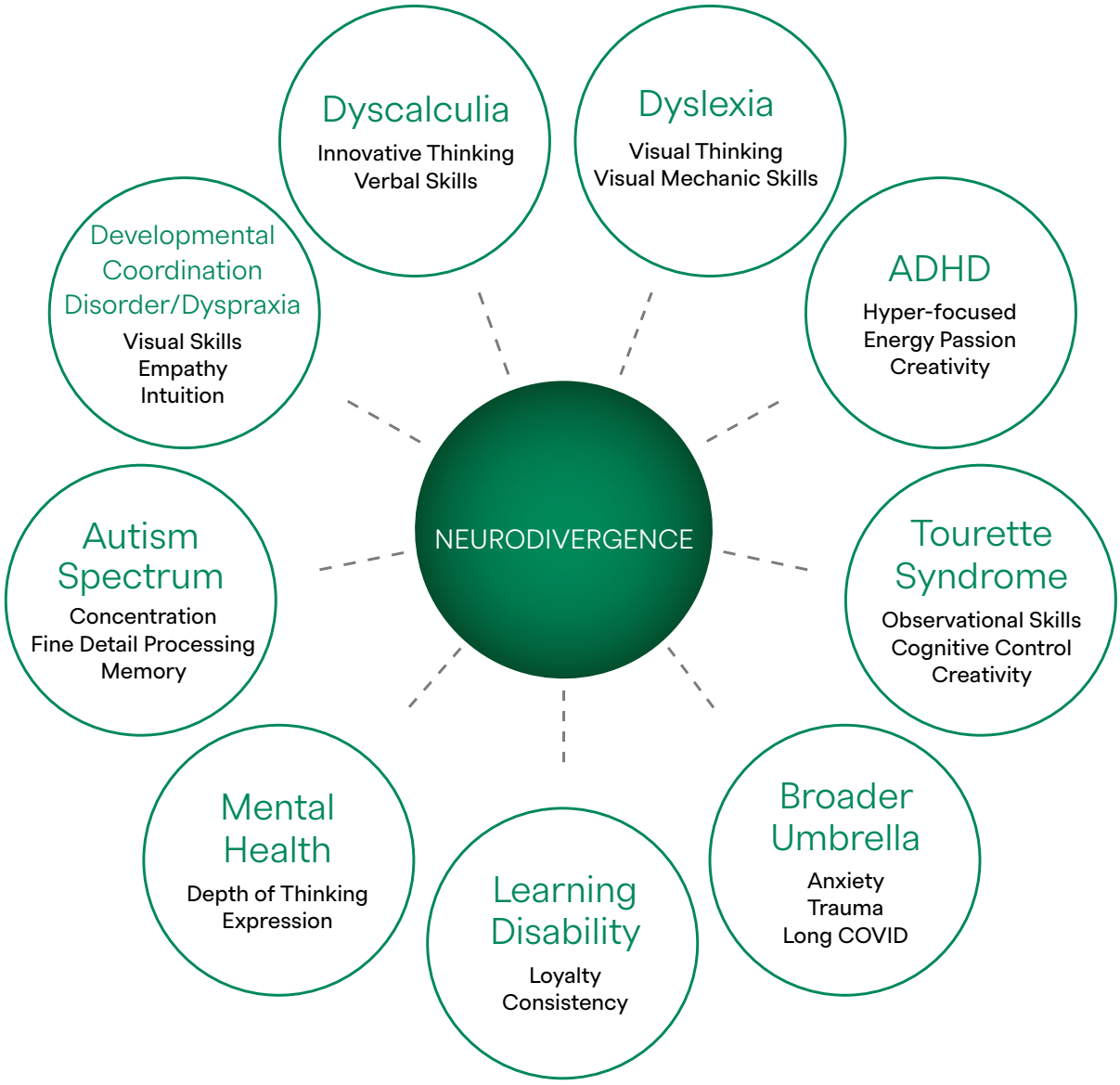
ADHD: Energetic, empathetic, and expressive individuals who may struggle with prioritization and focus.

Autism Spectrum: Highly detailed, process-oriented problem solvers with sensory and communication differences.

Broader Umbrella: Dyscalculia, Tourette syndrome, acquired neurodivergence, learning or invisible disabilities, and mental health conditions.

Dyslexia: Nonlinear, 3D thinkers with literacy challenges.

Dyspraxia: Creative, organized thinkers with coordination and spatial awareness difficulties.



See diagram above: While some mental health conditions (like bipolar disorder or schizophrenia) fall under the neurodivergent umbrella for some advocates, the medical field often treats them more like illnesses, focusing on symptom management and treatment. The key distinction in the neurodiversity movement is that being autistic or having ADHD is not seen as being "sick" or "ill," but simply being wired differently.

Neurodivergent describes someone whose brain processes information differently from the dominant norm. Neurodivergent individuals often exhibit unique strengths, such as creativity, energy, and innovative problem-solving, alongside challenges like anxiety, impulsivity, forgetfulness, or sensory overload. In many cases, these differences can be amplified—or alleviated—by the spaces we design.

Many people who are neurodivergent do not consider their condition a disorder or a deficit, but a natural variation of the human brain. Some qualities and attributes are innate to the individual while others are acquired over time or through an event, like acquired brain injury in a car accident. Different neurotypes are not interchangeable. Using precise language (e.g., ADHD vs. autism vs. dyslexia vs. sensory processing disorder) tells people you have taken the time to understand their experience, and not lump them into a stereotype.

These distinctions also matter in the design of environments and accommodations. It's important to remain mindful of nuances and understand how they can ensure that accommodations are truly responsive to individual needs, rather than based on broad assumptions. Designing neuroinclusive spaces doesn't mean making things "less stimulating" across the board but offering flexible adaptations and acknowledging difference.





RANGE OF STRENGTHS

Creativity + energy + innovation
3D visual thinker + non-linear
Divergent thought + quick witted
Hyper focus + attention to detail
Strong process + problem solving



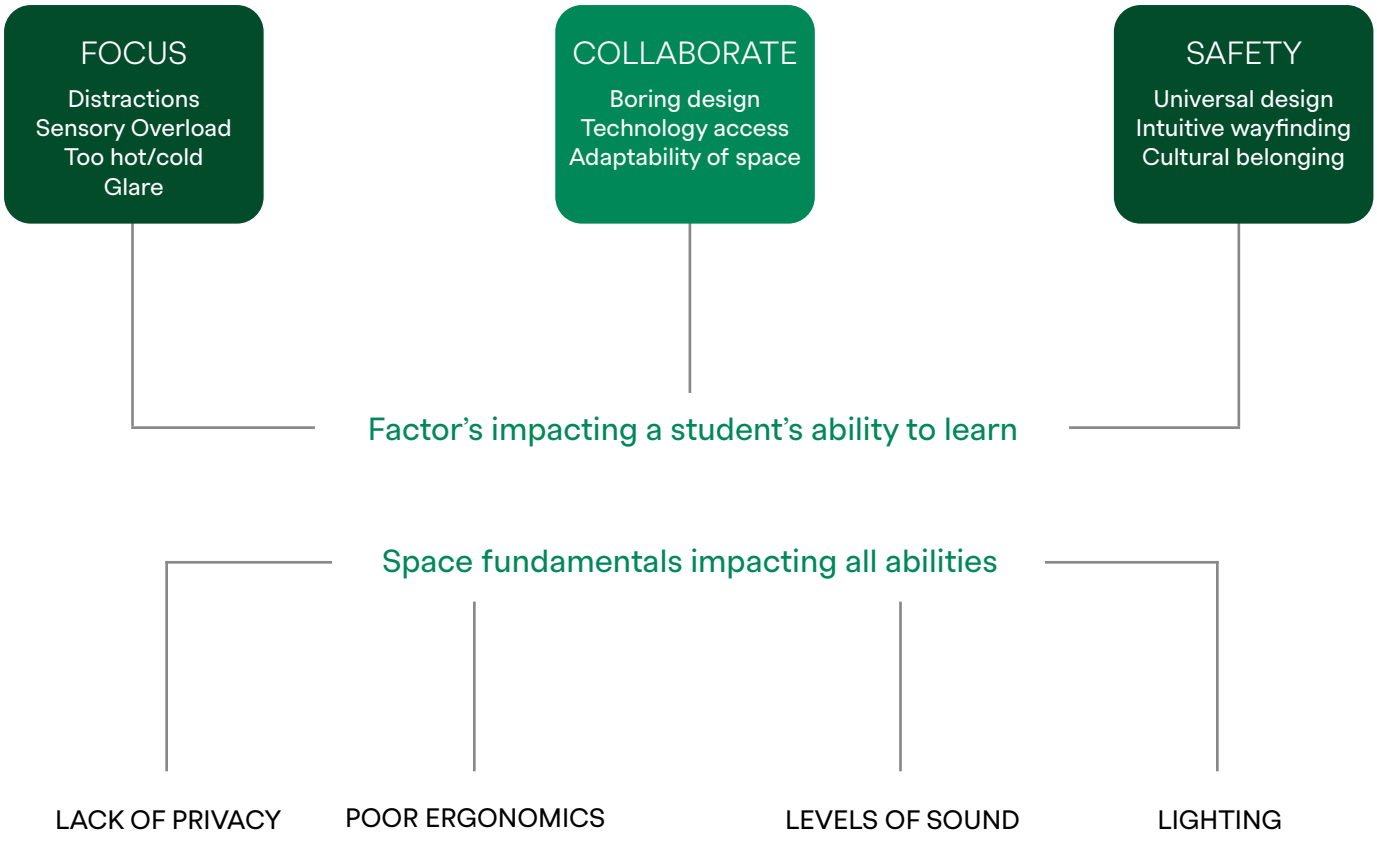
RANGE OF CHALLENGES

Anxiety + sensory overload
Poor spatial awareness + balance
Communication + social differences
Lack of concentration + distractibility
Difficulty planning & practical tasks

02 DESIGNING FOR THE WHOLE BODY AND MIND

To create inclusive learning environments, it's important to evaluate how every element of a space interacts with the human body as a whole, while also acknowledging that not all minds are alike, and some design solutions may cause disruption for others. Our job as designers and architects is to balance elements within a space with the effects it has on shaping a student's ability to focus, collaborate, and feel safe.

Distractions disturb focus and concentration, a boring design is uninspiring to a collaborative team, and a lack of wayfinding causes confusion and affects getting to class on time. Space fundamentals like lack of privacy, poor ergonomics, and levels of sound can deeply impact how a person experiences an environment.



To better understand how elements of space interact with the human body, we need a clear understanding of the body's functional domains: physical, cognitive, social, and environmental. Each domain shapes a student's learning experience, mood, and overall well-being. The specific qualities of each domain are referred to as attributes.

- The social domain focuses on how people interact with others, culture, and shared norms. It includes the skills and sensitivities that shape how we connect within a community or collective environment. Because different neurotypes navigate social settings in different ways, understanding the social domain helps designers create spaces that support inclusion. For example, many autistic students prefer predictable social structures and clear expectations. They benefit from furniture choices and room configurations that signal the types of activities intended for the space. A cluster of bean bags communicates a relaxed, informal setting while an ornate wooden conference table suggests a more structured environment. .

- The physical domain refers to how an individual's body engages with the surrounding environment, including aspects of movement, posture, and biology. Because different neurotypes experience these factors differently, they may interact with space in diverse ways. This is where universal design and sensory design should intersect to ensure that environments support a wide range of physical and sensory needs. One example for supporting students with ADHD is providing opportunities for movement. Seating that rocks or swivels can help them shift postures and better regulate their behavior.

- The environmental domain concerns the sensory qualities of the surrounding environment and the way it impacts the nervous system. These sensory inputs play a significant role in shaping security, mindfulness, and behavioral responses. Because neurotypes differ in their sensory thresholds, some seek strong sensory stimulation. while others become overwhelmed by minimal input like soft noise, bright light, or light touch. For example, individuals who suffer from migraines often exhibit sensitivity to light and smell. Providing access to private rooms where lights can be dimmed or turned off can support their self-regulation. Likewise, keeping food preparation areas enclosed helps limit exposure to strong odors.

- The cognitive domain includes everything the brain does to think, learn, remember, process information, and make decisions. It shapes how the mind responds to a space and whether an environment feels supportive or overwhelming. For example, students with PTSD often have heightened alertness that keeps them on constant lookout for potential threats. In a cluttered room, this can make it difficult to concentrate as their attention is pulled toward scanning a busy environment.

Design Affects our Body Systems

ATTRIBUTES		DESIGN CORRELATION
Interaction, social intuition, communication, collaboration, resilience, emotional, trauma, culture, behaviors	Social	Comfort, behavioral expectations, background activity, predictable layouts, social density, sensory distractions, symbolism, rules, poor ergonomics
Stamina, mobility, agility, strength, balance, endurance, motor coordination, pain sensitivity, fatigue levels, movement	Physical	Distance to activities, barriers/ reach ranges, crowd navigation, visual clarity, sounds, rest, operational aspects, ergonomics, sensory input, postures
Sensory processing sight: visual, sound: auditory, touch: tactile, smell: olfactory taste: gustatory	Environmental	Glare, contrast, movements, navigation, reverberation, background noise, HVAC, textural variety, strong scents, chemical odors, food, cleanliness, toxins
Memory, attention, perception, communication, problem-solving, attention span, processing speed, executive function, learning preference	Cognitive	Clutter/sparsity, distractions, spatial ambiguity, speech intelligibility, predictable cues, sensory level, consistency, wayfinding, adaptability

See diagram above: When these domains are harmonized, the result is a neuro-inclusive campus environment that supports learning for all students. And because sensory processing plays a key role across all four domains, it's important to consider sensory engagement and how to achieve the right balance.

03 SENSORY ENGAGEMENT AND BALANCE

Considerations in Project Work

How sensory and cognitive differences show up in space

1

Sensory Processing

Some people are hyper-sensitive (overwhelmed by stimuli), others hypo-sensitive (seek more input)

2

Cognitive Load

Visual clutter, confusing layouts, and unpredictable environments increase mental effort and fatigue

3

Executive Function

Navigation, transitions between spaces, time management all affected by spatial design

Designing for neurodiversity means addressing the entire sensory and cognitive experience—how space sounds, looks, feels, smells, and operates. Neurodivergent students often experience heightened or reduced sensitivity to sensory input, making choice,control, and predictability essential. Spaces that are legible and adaptable help neurodivergent individuals regulate sensory input and build confidence.

- Sensory strategies for smell and taste relate to olfactory and gustatory processing. The goal is to limit unexpected triggers, reduce chemical or food-based odors, offer ways to control exposure, and use low-odor materials.
- Sensory strategies for touch and feel focus on tactile and proprioceptive processing. The goal is to offer calming, predictable tactile input, reduce irritating or inconsistent textures, and ensure access to sensory regulation options without stigma.
- Sensory strategies for sight focus on visual processing. The goal is to reduce visual “noise,” support sustained attention, offer autonomy, and create familiar sight lines.
- Sensory strategies for sound address auditory processing. The goal is to minimize unpredictable noise, soften harsh acoustics, provide options for sound control, and support environments with more consistent auditory cues.

Visual

Simplify wayfinding and color transitions; use contrast strategically for clarity without overstimulation.

Auditory

Create sound gradients across spaces—quiet study zones, moderate social areas, and active collaboration hubs.

Tactile

Offer soft furnishings and texture variation to ground sensory experience.

Spatial

Provide retreat spaces such as reflection rooms or “low-stim” areas for decompression.

Control

Empower users with personal lighting, sound, and seating adjustment.

Providing variety in sensory intensity, posture, and privacy creates environments where all students can thrive. Engaging multiple senses can enhance alertness, memory, and creativity, but over-stimulation can cause discomfort or withdrawal. Design strategies should create balance using pattern and repetition for order, movement opportunities, and offer personalization over sensory input. Designing for diverse users means incorporating clear lines of sight and internal viewpoints, such as staircases and mezzanines, that support spatial orientation while also offering varied acoustic and lighting levels to accommodate different sensory needs, and incorporating predictable patterns and focal points to help users navigate intuitively.

04 THE ROLE OF BIOPHILIC DESIGN

Biophilic design—which involves integrating natural elements into the built environment—has proven benefits for reducing stress, enhancing focus, and supporting mental health.

Effective biophilic strategies help balance the sensory intensity often found in high-tech academic environments. Strategies include maximizing daylight and views in circulation and study areas, introducing plantings to soften otherwise sterile interiors, and using organic textures and patterns to reduce visual rigidity. In decompression spaces, subtle natural soundscape, like gentle water or birdsong, can further support regulation. Throughout a space, visual complexity should be carefully balanced with simplicity to avoid overwhelming the senses.

Bring Nature Indoors



Reduces stress

Enhances focus

Supports mental health

Direct Connection With Nature

Direct connection with nature refers to actual, real-world exposure to natural elements, not representations of nature. This connection matters because it engages multiple senses simultaneously and has the strongest evidence for improving mood, restoration, and a stronger sense of place.



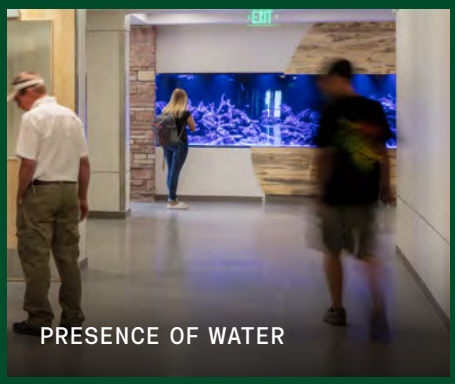
VISUAL CONNECTION WITH NATURE

Provide views of living systems such as trees, mountains and other natural elements to improve mental engagement and attentiveness. Higher education settings may include study lounges overlooking a campus quad or dining areas with views to the sky and clouds.



NON-VISUAL CONNECTION WITH NATURE

Include biophilic patterns that engage the senses other than sight to create meaningful experience of the natural world. Birdsong and the smell of flowers can be experienced with operable windows and bringing vegetation inside.



PRESENCE OF WATER

Incorporate water in a way that can be seen, heard, or touched. Water features should be low-intensity sounds like indoor fountains or student spaces that open to a courtyard reflecting pool .



DYNAMIC & DIFFUSE LIGHT

Increase access to daylight and mimic the changing qualities of natural light found in outdoor environments. Variations in light as seen throughout the day can be expressed with circadian lighting systems, skylights, and dappled light filtered through trees.



THERMAL & AIRFLOW VARIABILITY

Rather than maintaining a completely uniform indoor environment, this pattern introduces controlled diversity that enhances comfort and awareness of natural conditions. Examples include outdoor terraces, warmth of a fireplace, and natural ventilation strategies.



NON-RHYTHMIC SENSORY STIMULI

Introduce brief, irregular, and naturally occurring sensory experiences without causing distraction. These stimuli are typically subtle and unpredictable. Provide seating near circulation for intermittent traffic flow or foliage that can move randomly.

Indirect Connection With Nature

Indirect connection with nature refers to the use of representations, materials, patterns, and processes that evoke nature when direct access to natural elements is limited or unavailable. Rather than experiencing nature firsthand, occupants encounter nature-inspired cues that reinforce a connection to the natural world. Indirect nature-based interventions can provide many of the benefits of biophilic design while offering greater predictability and control than some direct sensory experiences.



Incorporate biophilic design characteristics commonly found in natural environments to create a richer, more restorative sensory experience. This will help students perceive a space as more connected to the natural world. Include materials such as wood, stone, and vegetation. Consider celebrating the local ecology by using local materials.



Use materials, forms, textures, colors, and patterns that reference nature without being actual natural elements. These design features evoke nature through abstraction. Use carpet patterns inspired by rivers, topography or biomorphic patterns, and furniture with organic, flowing forms.



Provide design patterns that foster awareness of and engagement with the processes, cycles, and changes that occur in nature over time. Unlike other biophilic patterns that focus on specific natural elements, this emphasizes an understanding of nature as a dynamic system, revealing seasonal, ecological, and environmental processes that connect people to the broader world around them. A spiral staircase represents growth, evolution, or cyclical processes.

Experience of Space and Place



Provide unobstructed views across a space or landscape, allowing students to observe their surroundings while maintaining a sense of awareness, orientation, and opportunity. Rooted in human evolutionary preferences, prospect supports the ability to survey an environment, and identify pathways or destinations. Spaces that offer prospect often feel open, expansive, and visually connected. Clear sight lines can enhance feelings of safety and control, particularly in unfamiliar environments.



Complexity and order is a biophilic design pattern that creates environments rich in information and sensory interest while maintaining a clear, organized structure that is easy to understand and navigate. Inspired by natural environments, this pattern balances variety with coherence, offering layers of detail, texture, and discovery without creating confusion or chaos. A good example is the array of books in a learning commons but, when organized on shelves, the monotony is reduced.



Include areas of shelter, protection, and retreat from the surrounding environment while maintaining awareness of what is happening beyond the space. Refuge supports the desire to feel secure and protected. These spaces offer opportunities for restoration, focused work, reflection, and relief from sensory or social demands. Spaces can include alcoves, booth seating and window seats with high-backed lounge chairs.



Connection to place strengthens the relationship between students and their environment by reflecting the local ecology, culture, history, geography, and identity of a specific region. Rather than creating a generic experience, this approach fosters a sense of belonging by grounding students in the unique characteristics of a place. Design becomes a vehicle for storytelling, helping people understand where they are and how they relate to the broader community and landscape.

05 INCLUSIVE DESIGN AS A LEARNING STRATEGY

Designing for neurodiversity is not only the right thing to do—it's a strategic learning investment in academic success. Environments that offer clarity enhance focus, comprehension, and engagement.

Inclusive spaces can remove barriers to participation and belonging, improve culture and attitudes toward differences, and enhance performance and creativity through environmental support.



Increase participation and belonging

Improve culture and attitudes

Increase choice and autonomy

Enhance performance and creativity

Core Inclusive Design Interventions



Predictability

Intuitive layouts and consistent environmental cues help students feel oriented and improve navigation.



Autonomy

Access to varied settings foster independence and support individual learning preferences.



Transparency

Open sightlines and visible activity reduce uncertainty and help build confidence.



Belonging

Environments that reflect diverse identities and needs help students feel welcomed, valued, and connected.



Balance

A thoughtful balance of sensory stimulation and restoration supports focus, comfort, and emotional regulation.

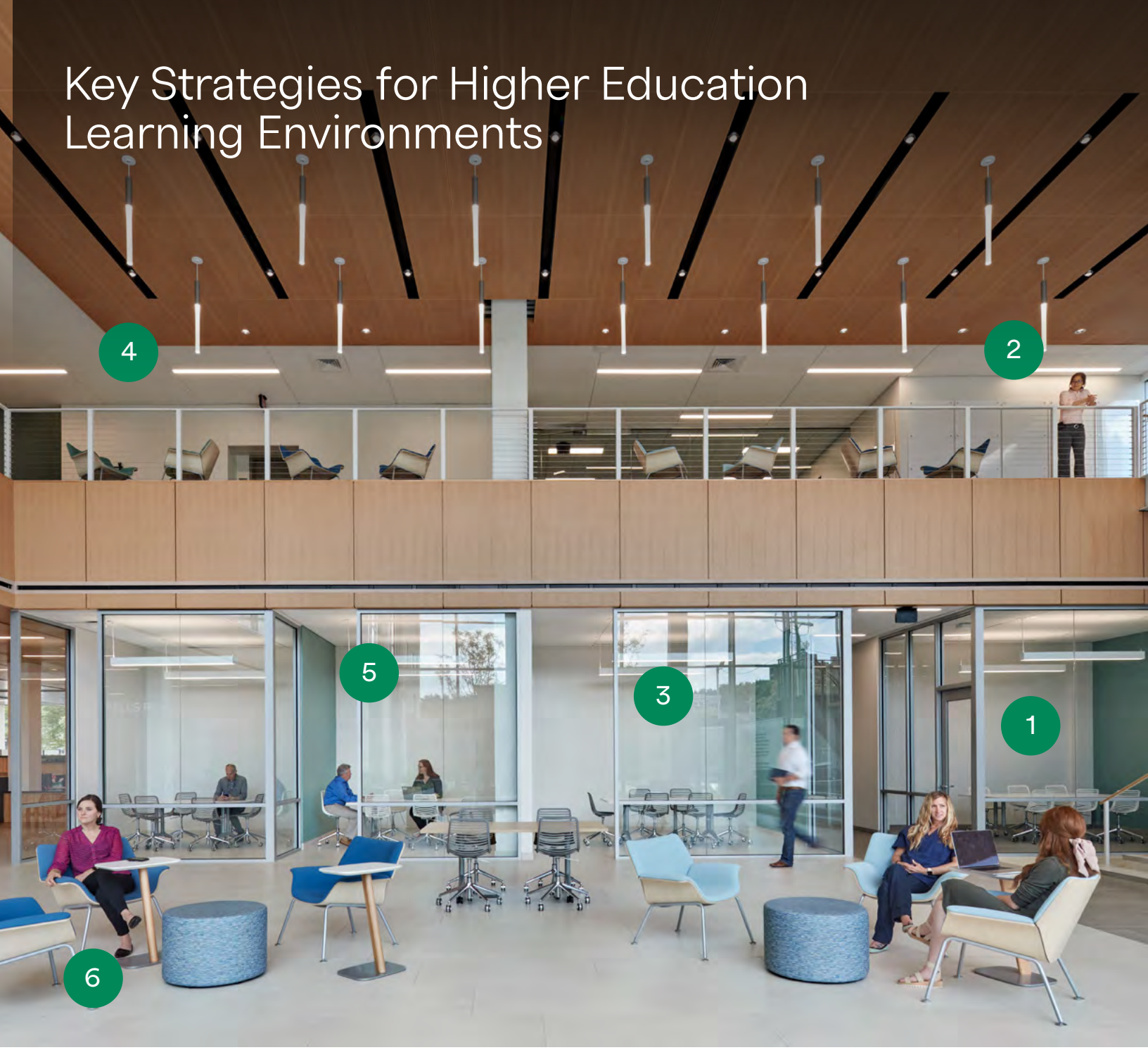
Inclusive design empowers higher education institutions to reflect the diversity of their communities and prepare all students for success. When neurodivergent students feel safe, understood, and empowered, learning outcomes improve across the entire population. These principles become most powerful when they translate into concrete choices in the built environment.

For example:

- Spatial familiarity and wayfinding are essential for confident navigation. Consistent signage hierarchies, clear visual landmarks, and purposeful color-coding strengthen spatial memory and reduce cognitive load. Intuitive circulation paths and well-organized layouts further support independence and ease of movement.
- Inclusive furniture and seating are important for physical comfort and dignity. Providing a variety of adjustable furniture accommodates diverse body types and promotes healthier ergonomics. Seating options should include bariatric sizes and sensory-friendly textures to ensure comfort, accessibility, and a welcoming environment for all users.



Key Strategies for Higher Education Learning Environments



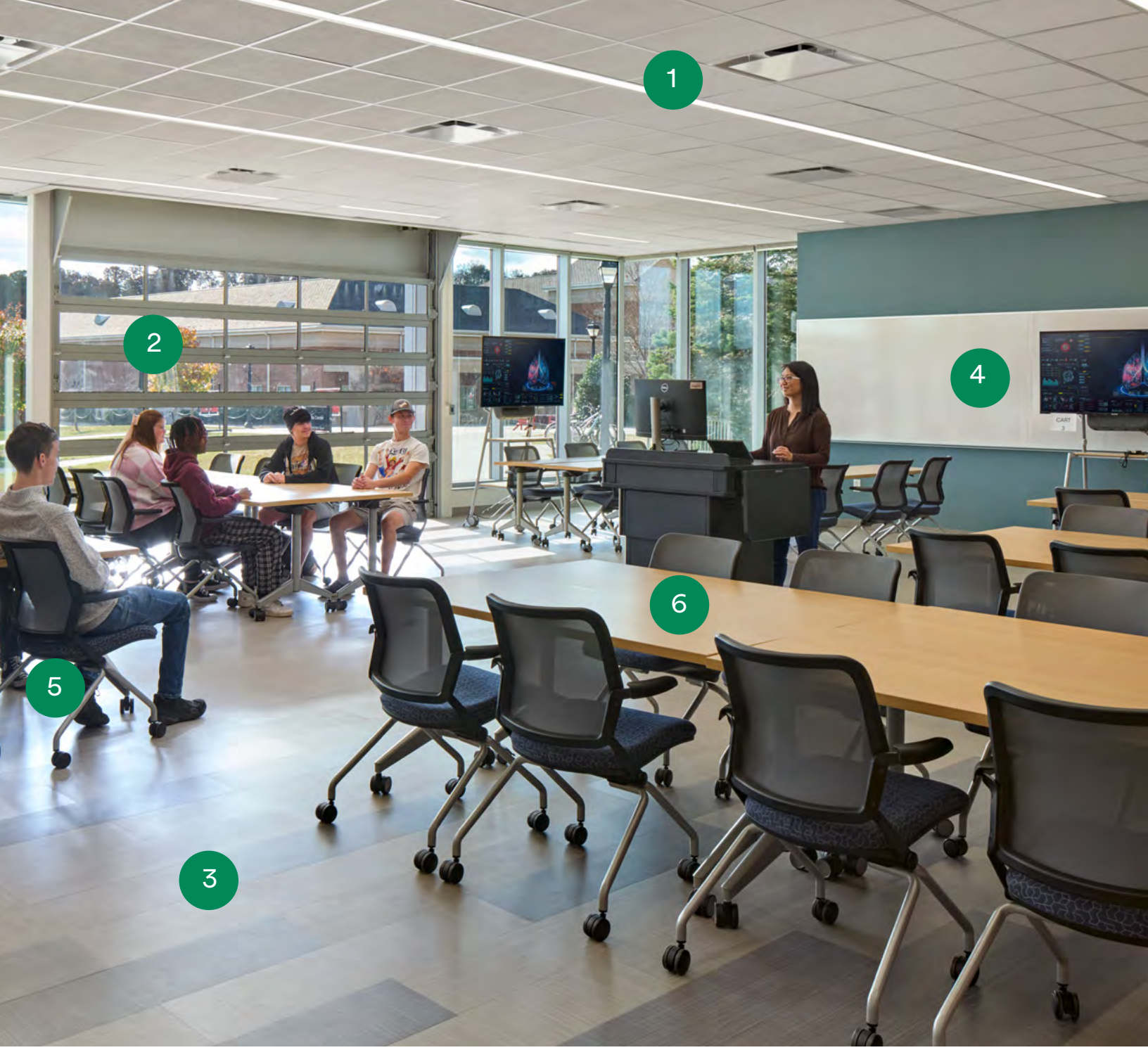
Lobby Design

1. Dimmable LED lights, shielding, <10% flicker
2. Prospect with predictable visual hierarchy, a clear focal point, and no visual surprises
3. Reduced information density with visual clarity through clean and tidy spaces
4. Balance visual complexity and avoid cold, institutional textures
5. Collaboration zones (55-65 dBA target)
6. Chair glides on all furniture to remove “Spike Sounds”



Study Spaces

1. Acoustic zones with open and enclosed spaces and variety of furniture and placement to offer choice
2. Quiet zones (30-40 dBA Target) and use carpet tile with cushion backing
3. Visual escape spaces
4. Visual connection with nature
5. Limit pattern complexity and distribution with a calm palette
6. No more than one accent wall with low-VOC (<g/L) paints, etc.



Classroom Design

1. Acoustic ceiling tiles, 0.70+ NRC min
2. Physical connection with nature for regulation and fresh air
3. Neutral colors as baseline
4. Neutral, matte finish teaching surface
5. Flexible, firm, stable seating with upholstered seat pans and flex back
6. Soft, matte, smooth finishes in wood tones

CONCLUSION

The future of higher education depends not only on what we teach, but on the environments in which learning unfolds. As campuses grow more diverse, the built environment must evolve to reflect a deeper understanding of how students think, feel, and engage with the world around them. Designing for neurodiversity acknowledges that learning is shaped as much by the nervous system as by curriculum, and that space has the power to either constrain or unlock human potential.

Neuroinclusive design moves beyond minimum standards and one-size-fits-all solutions. It recognizes that students experience space through their bodies, senses, and nervous systems, and that these experiences directly impact comprehension, regulation, confidence, and learning outcomes. By addressing the physical, cognitive, social, and environmental domains—and by providing choice, clarity, and control—designers can create campuses that support self-regulation, reduce cognitive load, and foster engagement for all learners.

Importantly, designing for neurodiversity does not mean designing exclusively for a subset of students. When environments are more legible, flexible, and responsive, everyone benefits. The same strategies that support neurodivergent students—clear wayfinding, sensory balance, biophilic connections, adaptable furniture, and predictable spatial cues—also enhance stability, well-being, and performance across the entire campus community.

As institutions prepare students for an increasingly complex and diverse world, the built environment must evolve alongside pedagogical and cultural change. Neuroinclusive design is not simply a trend or an accommodation, but a strategic, human-centered approach to learning. By embracing neurodiversity as a design driver, higher education campuses can become places where all students feel supported, empowered, and capable of thriving—academically, socially, and personally. When we design with neurodiversity in mind, we design for humanity in all its complexity.



Key Design Considerations



Incorporate a balanced palette of materials and textures that provide tactile interest without creating sensory clutter. Enhance sensory comfort while avoiding overly reflective, visually busy, or highly patterned surfaces.



Design environments with clear spatial organization and intuitive navigation cues through landmarks, material transitions, color changes and signage. Effective wayfinding reduces cognitive load and supports independent navigation.



Provide layered and adaptable lighting solutions that support a range of activities and sensory preferences. Maximize access to daylight while controlling glare, use indirect illumination and adjustable lighting levels.



Integrate acoustic strategies that support both concentration and communication through sound-absorbing materials, acoustic ceilings, white-noise, upholstered furnishings, and activity-based zoning. Provide quiet spaces and minimize disruptive background noise to reduce cognitive fatigue and improve focus.



Create a variety of settings that support different modes of learning, working, and social interaction. Incorporate adaptable furnishings, multiple posture options, and areas for focus & collaboration. This empowers students to choose the best support for their needs, preferences, and activities.

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