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Triton College

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How Triton College Built a More Inclusive Campus Through Neurodiversity

RIVER GROVE, Ill.— Triton College is helping shape the future of higher education by championing neurodiversity and supporting the many ways people think and learn. Dean of Academic Success Hilary Meyer has spearheaded the college's efforts in building an academic environment that embraces different modes of learning. And she's urging other colleges and universities to do the same.

According to Meyer, neurodiversity efforts at many colleges and universities are embedded in disability services departments. Triton College sets itself apart by adopting an institution-wide effort to adopt best practices and improve the culture for enrolled students and members of the public.

While not a new term, "neurodiversity" has gained traction in academia as a movement that embraces variations in brain function not as deficits but as strengths.

"It's a way to acknowledge that there's all sorts of thinking out there," Meyer said. "Sometimes it's connected to a formal diagnosis, but sometimes it's not."

Diagnoses for those that identify as neurodivergent may include people with autism, learning disabilities, or conditions like Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), and others who think and learn differently—whether they have a clinical diagnosis. "People may identify as neurodivergent without having a clinical diagnosis," said Meyer.

Triton College has made neurodiversity a key priority in its strategic plan for 2023-2025. Meyer chairs a committee of 20 faculty and staff members from the college to develop an approach at making a more neuro-inclusive campus. While no easy feat, Meyer shared that the initiative was a natural progression for Triton College and it aligned closely with its mission.

"Our mission is about valuing the individual and educating and serving the community," she said. "Our work is always about lowering barriers and ensuring equity."

One major outcome of the strategic plan has been the redesign of the Academic Success Center into a flexible space for all learners. Alterations to the area included changing to a relaxed color palette of blues and grays, incorporating cozy spaces apt for studying, installing movable

furniture of varying height and rotating chairs. While these might seem like simple changes, Meyer said they can go a long way.

“If you’re neurotypical and you go through the world and the world usually fits you, it may seem cosmetic or feel unnecessary,” she said. “But for a student who works best through movement, having a chair that allows that movement is huge. It may not seem to make that much of a difference, but for those who it matters to, it matters.”

Another key component was making all services easily accessible to students. Meyer said her committee is working closely with the Center for Access and Accommodative Services (CAAS) to provide more resources to those without formal accommodations or diagnoses. For example, Triton offers notetaking software to students that can convert speech to text and text-reading software that can convert text to speech.

“If someone prefers to have a document read aloud, that’s something we can provide without requiring an accommodation,” she said.

CAAS Director Dominique Dial said that developing a culture that embraces all types of learning is crucial for academic success. Celebrating neurodiversity, she added, can encourage students who might not otherwise seek assistance, get the resources that can help them excel.

“We have seen an increase in requests,” Dial said. “We think that us being out there and being more vocal about what we offer and what we’re trying to do has helped drive that.

“We’ve had students contact us who never had accommodations before and just didn’t understand that how they did things was different than a neurotypical individual. It’s not that something’s wrong, something’s just missing. So how can we support you in your way of learning?”

Meyer acknowledged that transforming an institution to embrace neurodiversity can seem overwhelming, but she said there’s small steps administrators can take with significant impact. One simple inclusion is placing fidget toys on tables to help students focus or placing microphones in classrooms.

“These are small things,” she said. “It can be done and then you can get to a campus-wide cultural overhaul in time. But starting small is ok and it matters and it makes a difference.”

Meyer’s work in neurodiversity has garnered national attention. She presented at this year’s National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) conference in New Orleans, the biggest student affairs association in the country. She also spoke at the Illinois Community College Diversity Commission and at the 2024 American Association of Community Colleges Conference in Louisville. In addition, Meyer has been featured in the *Community College Journal*, *Community College Daily*, and she published an article in the Society for College and University Planning journal *Planning for Higher Education*.

Information about Triton College's Center for Access and Accommodative Services (CAAS) is available at triton.edu/caas.

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ABOUT TRITON COLLEGE

Triton College is an institution of higher education dedicated to student success. Triton offers more than 120 degree and certificate programs designed for students to realize their career aspirations and effectively compete in a global economy. The college campus spans 110 acres in River Grove, Illinois, holds classes at satellite locations and offers online learning opportunities. Triton's exemplary faculty and staff work to provide high-quality, convenient and affordable educational opportunities to more than 10,000 students each year. Triton College is a member of The Community Colleges of Illinois and accredited by the Higher Learning Commission. Learn more at triton.edu/.