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Neurodivergence in Management Courses: Strategies to Support Student Learning

Justice McAdoo
D.W. Johnston School of Business, University of Tennessee Southern

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Abstract: *Between 10% and 30% of college students display neurodivergent traits. Yet, the diagnosis challenges educators to shatter stigmas while creating pathways to success for students. Recognizing different learning styles, perceptions, and approaches to communication requires new, value-added ways of thinking. Barriers to success for neurodivergent college students include one-dimensional curriculum, resistance to accommodations, and "othering" based on societal norms. This qualitative multiple case study examines the experiences and tools neurodivergent college students use to achieve success in college management programs. This research explores the concept of neurodivergent experiences in the college management classroom, emphasizing individuals' perspectives on the lack of accommodations in the traditional educational setting. The researcher conducted semistructured interviews with three college educated individuals with neurodivergent tendencies. Neurodivergence is defined as the process by which individuals' brains process information and function differently from what is typically considered "normal." This includes but is not limited to people with conditions such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AuDHD), dyslexia, Tourette's syndrome, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). This study examined three key challenges individuals with neurodivergent tendencies experience in the management classroom setting: social interactions, executive functioning, and sensory sensitivities using self-determination theory (SDT). Future implications of the study will legitimize tools to support neurodivergent students' success, help educators accept their responsibility in shared learning outcomes, and reduce future workplace intolerance.*

Keywords: neurodivergence, management education, inclusion, student learning outcomes, organizational behavior

INTRODUCTION

Neurodivergent individuals, including those with conditions such as ADHD, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), dyslexia, and others face a unique set of challenges in traditional management

classroom settings. These challenges regularly stem from rigid academic structures, social expectations, and teaching methods that are not designed with neurodiversity in mind. Neurodivergent students encounter structural and attitudinal barriers to access in the educational environment such as access to assistive technology, cognitive and physical tools, and social wellness. Combined, the lack of access to vital support mechanisms for neurodivergent individuals in the classroom setting prevents the discovery and implementation of new information from said individuals.

Defining neurodivergent conditions is not easy. Being properly diagnosed might not occur until adult years for some, while others receive support much earlier. Neurodivergence describes people who process, learn, or behave differently than neurotypical people characterized by significant limitations and challenges in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior (Centers for Disease Control, 2025a). While neurodivergent conditions can include people with intellectual disabilities, it does not always mean an individual has an intellectual disability. Recognition of neurodiversity by formal institutions has historically been limited to outward or physical needs while cognition-related disabilities, psychological conditions, and/or combination disabilities go underserved despite the dispersion of such conditions throughout society (Borsotti, Begel, & Bjørn, 2024).

Recognizing the impact of neurodivergent individuals' contributions as inventors, entrepreneurs, intrapreneurs, and world-renowned researchers is immense. Neurodiverse business leaders and influencers such as Lee Chambers, Aayliah Alicia Thompson, Sir Richard Branson, Ingvar Kamprad, and Bill Gates built their companies based on significant and unique perspectives. Solving problems, streamlining services, and creating entirely new industries allows neurodivergent individuals to stimulate change through innovation. Their contributions include a myriad of technologies, leadership excellence, entertainment, and functional solutions. Lee Chambers, a leading psychologist and wellbeing consultant, founded Male Allies and Essentialise Workplace Wellbeing. Male Allies UK executes insightful action plans to dismantle barriers to collaboration between men and women in the workplace. Men in leadership positions fully participate in four effective actions such as (a) bystander intervention, (b) community organizing, (c) advocacy, and (d) power and resource sharing (maleallies.co.uk, 2025). Essentialise Workplace Wellbeing designs four wellbeing solutions for workplace workshops, strategies, programs, and inclusion (essentialise.co.uk, 2025). Lee Chambers was diagnosed with autism at the age of 35. Like many individuals with autism, Lee's diagnosis came later in life due to the lack of understanding and resources available for him.

Aaliyah Alicia Thompson garnered much success as an early diagnosed person with autism running a small business just outside of Atlanta, GA. At age five, Aayliah's autism diagnosis did not prevent her from learning or achieving. Working in a beauty salon helped solidify Aaliyah's passion for serving others creatively (aaliyahbeautybar.com, 2025). Her ability to reimagine

clients' hairstyles, makeup, nails, and overall look aligned with a strength shared by individuals with autism; creative innovation (aayliyahbeautybar.com, 2025; Lampinen et al., 2025).

Sir Richard Branson founded Virgin in 1970 as a mail-order record retailer, later establishing Virgin Records, which grew into the world's largest independent record label (Braha, 2024). Due to the brand's successful business model, Virgin expanded beyond music into diverse sectors including travel, telecommunications, health, banking, and leisure (Braha, 2024). Today, the Virgin brand contains more than 40 companies operating across over 35 countries, making it one of the world's most admired business groups (Braha, 2024). Sir Richard Branson experienced dyslexia during his early childhood. Struggling to see words separately, being confused about linear concepts, and being typecast as lazy by his teachers permitted Sir Richard Branson to channel creative strengths (Craine, 2020). In 2024, Sir Richard Branson opened the University of Dyslexic Thinking to provide learners with a new way of measuring intelligence. Artificial intelligence dominates new technology streams that require a broader focus on human skills such as complex problem solving, adaptability, resilience, communication and creative thinking (virgin.com, 2025). Traditional workplace leaders disregard dyslexic individuals' skill sets or natural abilities that are not measured by regular education and workplace tests. The linear environment paints dyslexia as a deficit needing to be corrected like most individuals with neurodivergent tendencies (Munn, 2024).

Individuals with neurodivergent tendencies not only find alternative ways to function in society but generate ideas to carve out new niches. These niches include industries in software development, creative design and writing, content development, finance and consulting, scientific research, engineering, manufacturing, and entrepreneurship. Approximately 50% of autistic people display no deficiencies in physical acuity and maintain an average IQ or greater (Katusic, Myers, Weaver, & Voigt, 2021). Industries reap the tangible benefits neurodiverse individuals create, such as improved employment integration, increased budgetary efficiencies, and sustainable economic contributors (Barrington, Bruyere, and Waedler, 2014; Krzeminska, Austin, Bruyère, Hedley, 2019).

By paying attention to detail, neurodivergent individuals improve organizational budgetary inefficiencies, recognize patterns, and analyze and customize processes. These actions enable them to identify errors, optimize workflows, and reduce wasteful spending in ways that neurotypical colleagues might overlook. Individuals with neurodivergent tendencies meticulously spot details, making them highly effective in roles requiring precision, such as data analysis, accounting, and quality assurance. Neurodivergent employees spot typos, data inconsistencies, and anomalies in financial records or operational processes that others might miss, leading to greater accuracy and fewer costly errors. Neurodiverse teams are 30% more productive than neurotypical ones and make fewer errors (Harvard Business Review, 2017). This demonstrates the tangible advantages of embracing neurodiversity. Companies that offer an inclusive environment for neurodivergent

employees see a 28% higher revenue, 30% greater profit margins, and about double the net income compared to their competitors (Accenture, 2018). Employers who embrace neurodiversity see a 90% increase in employee retention, reducing costly turnover and ensuring a stable, experienced workforce (Accenture, 2018).

Autistic individuals thrive on creating organization from chaos and enjoy streamlining processes. For example, autistic individuals view problems from unconventional, logical angles, allowing them to identify bottlenecks or inefficient workflows and propose more effective, direct solutions. This can result in significant cost savings and increased productivity. Auticon, a small California start-up technology firm where most of the staff are on the autism spectrum, has created a supportive workplace tailored to autistic strengths and needs (BBC, 2026). Auticon's founder built the business to give autistic adults meaningful employment opportunities and provide accommodations such as quieter workspaces, flexible communication options, and roles that reduce social pressure (BBC, 2026). The company infuses inclusive, measurable technology strategies for services in data analysis, software development, AI, and cybersecurity to clients. Auticon focuses on neuroinclusion by offering job coaching and workplace support, aiming to leverage the cognitive strengths of autistic individuals (Auticon, 2026). Employees describe feeling more comfortable and productive in this environment compared with traditional offices, where social expectations in interviews and daily interactions can be intimidating and disadvantage autistic candidates (Auticon, 2026). Autistic people face challenges in finding employment, and organizations with inclusive practices can help them thrive professionally.

Autistic individuals use less cognitive bias when making financial decisions versus neurotypical individuals who use "sunk cost" bias or "framing effects". Their ability to unpack and dissect situations tends to be more deliberate and objective rather than emotional or socially influenced, which can lead to more sound, economically beneficial financial choices and a strong drive to avoid unnecessary risks (Cope & Remington, 2022). A preference for structure and routine, along with a strong work ethic, means that autistic employees are often dependable and consistent in their roles (Cope & Remington, 2022; Eisner, 2025). This can lead to lower employee turnover rates, which directly translates into cost savings for companies by avoiding the expenses associated with frequent recruitment and training of new hires (Cope & Remington, 2022).

Individuals on the spectrum tend to be straightforward, value transparency, and exhibit a strong sense of justice and integrity (Sutherland, Fletcher-Watson, Long, & Crompton, 2025). This quality helps business leaders in finance and compliance-related roles avoid ethical and legal pitfalls that can result in significant financial loss for an organization. The ability to hyperfocus on complex or repetitive tasks without distraction enables autistic employees to complete projects faster and more accurately. A study by JPMorgan Chase found that employees in their Autism at Work program were 48% faster at completing tasks and up to 92% more accurate than their neurotypical colleagues in certain roles (Employee Benefit News, 2020).

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LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, higher education has recognized the need to better support neurodivergent students, particularly those on the autism spectrum, who are increasingly enrolling in undergraduate programs across disciplines including business and management (Latimer, Massaro, & Monroe, 2025; Wolpe, 2024). Driving this continued surge, the proportion of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the United States has increased from 1 in 150 in the year 2000 to approximately 1 in 31 by 2022. While historically identifying fewer children, the largest increases in diagnosis rates over the past decade have been among Hispanic, Black, and Asian children, with minority groups now showing higher overall prevalence than white children (Centers for Disease Control, 2025b). While early data included lower rates of intellectual disability, recent studies confirm that over 60% of children with ASD in the latest surveys exhibit severe or borderline intellectual disabilities, highlighting a significant need for support (Centers for Disease Control, 2025b).

Autistic students bring valuable perspectives to academic and professional settings; however, existing pedagogical structures in business classrooms often inadequately accommodate their needs, leading to barriers in academic performance, participation, and well-being (Cai & Richdale, 2016). This literature review explores three key challenges including social interactions, executive functioning, and sensory sensitivities experienced by autistic individuals in the college management classroom through the theoretical lens of self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000). SDT emphasizes the universal psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and provides a framework for understanding how educational environments either support or deter student motivation. Legitimizing tools to support neurodivergent success, fostering educator responsibility in shared learning outcomes, and addressing future workplace intolerance align with SDT and broader inclusion goals.

Accommodations for neurodivergent individuals in the college management classroom largely focuses on time and space. While helpful, time and space accommodations limit neurodivergent individuals' focus on avoiding academic underachievement. Meaningful tools, such as technology integration combined with task optimization, empower neurodivergent individuals to create and explore their learning. Researchers frequently identify social communication challenges as a primary feature associated with autism spectrum conditions (ASC). Autistic individuals experience difficulty interpreting verbal and nonverbal social cues, engaging in spontaneous group interactions, and navigating dynamic peer communication environments (Attwood, 2007; Baron-Cohen, 2008). The social demands of frequent group projects, case discussions, presentations, and peer evaluations can overwhelm autistic students in the college management classroom. Table 1 includes characteristics of time and space accommodations and meaningful tools.

Table 1: *Classroom Tool Categories*

Feature	Time and Space (Accommodations)	Meaningful Tools (Supportive Strategies)
Goal	Reduces pressure and stress	Increases engagement and capability
Approach	Slows down the process	Changes the method of learning
Focus	Improves sensory and anxiety reduction	Manages executive function and organization
Outcome	Allows completion of work	Empowers clarity and autonomy

Time and space accommodations for autistic college students provide comfort while meaningful tools foster proactive engagement. Autistic students in higher education report feeling excluded or misunderstood during group discussions, particularly in courses emphasizing participatory learning (Ciurana & Garcia, 2025). Cameron, Borland, Tonge, and Gray (2022) discovered that autistic students often withdraw from classroom dialogue when rapid turn-taking and ambiguous social cues heighten anxiety and reduce perceived competence, not due to lack of knowledge. Additionally, social expectations in professional disciplines like business emphasize networking and collaboration norms that amplify discomfort for autistic learners (Austin & Pisano, 2017). In workplace hiring, traditional face-to-face interviews can obscure rather than reveal the abilities of candidates on the autism spectrum; using alternative assessments such as work portfolios or task simulations can provide a more accurate basis for hiring decisions (Austin & Pisano, 2017).

Research confirms that decoding nonverbal communication often feels like an "unwritten language" to autistic adults, leading to overwhelm in real-time interactions (Radford, Reidinger Kapp, & de Marchena, 2025). Non-verbal cue reliance reflected poorly in autistic individuals' ability to process facial and body language signals from neurotypical peers (Pelzl et al., 2023). Verbal cues such as vocal tone, inflection, and projection did not resonate with autistic individuals to produce conversation continuity (Pelzl et al., 2023). Unpredictable or "open-ended" social situations present significant barriers compared to structured tasks. For example, common use of open forum Zoom or Microsoft Teams meetings by professors may surprise individuals on the spectrum who prefer structured and expected lesson plans prior to the meetings. The processing time for such interactions reduces understanding and productivity while imposing possible energy drain for autistic college students. When processing time takes too long, neurotypical professors and peers may misinterpret their silence as lack of effort and ignorance.

Neurodivergent college students experience difficulty with social reciprocity, such as identifying when a conversation is ending or navigating turn-taking (Ezell, 2026). These experiences create less tolerance when frustrations rise between neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals. Milton

(2012) stated misunderstandings occur when autistic and non-autistic individuals have different communication styles. Neurodivergent people are required to adapt to neurotypical communication standards while the same is not true for neurotypical people.

Within the SDT framework, social interactions contribute directly to the need for relatedness or the sense of connection, belonging, and mutual respect essential for intrinsic motivation. When autistic students feel socially excluded or unable to participate meaningfully, their relatedness needs become thwarted, undermining motivation and engagement in the classroom (Kasari & Sterling, 2013). For instance, ambiguous group norms in case study debates may signal to autistic learners that they do not "fit," reducing intrinsic drive and increasing stress. Common "fit" problems include different outward appearance, body language, speech tone, volume, fluidity, and delayed responses. Autistic individuals prioritize comfort over social norms concerning fashion trends or grooming. This can signal unfair devaluation of the autistic individual based on appearance rather than inclusion for their skill or knowledge.

Structured and transparent group protocols, such as defined roles, clear expectations, and alternative participation options can mitigate social barriers (Locke, Osuna, Myrvold, & Closson, 2024). These practices not only support autistic students but also create more equitable participation for all learners by clarifying norms and reducing social ambiguity. Repetitive behaviors signal safety in predicting whether participating encourages central nervous regularity. When clinicians attempt to correct unharmful repetitive behaviors, autistic students' sensory processing ability reduces (Krishnan, Cohn, & Orsmond, 2024). Just as a power outage midway through baking yields an unfinished cake, this scenario results in an incomplete outcome for autistic students adjusting and thriving in the college atmosphere.

Executive functioning includes essential cognitive processes for planning, organization, task initiation, time management, and self-regulation. Autistic individuals commonly experience executive challenges, including difficulty in managing complex assignments, prioritizing tasks, and shifting attention between competing demands (Kofler et al., 2024). Within management courses, which often require integration of multiple learning modalities and complex assessments, these demands can be pronounced.

Autistic students may struggle with organizing long-term or complex tasks, meeting deadlines in fast-paced course sequences, and translating broad assignment descriptions into actionable subtasks (Barkley, 2012; Rapaport, Clapham, Adams, Lawson, Porayska-Pomsta, & Pellicano, 2024; White et al., 2017). A qualitative study of autistic college students revealed recurrent frustration with unstructured assignments and limited clarity in expectations, which exacerbated anxiety and hindered performance (Cooper, Smith, & Russell, 2017). Co-occurring attention challenges and differences in learning styles create shared frustration for neurodivergent and neurotypical participants in the classroom.

Executive functioning intersects with SDT's need for competence, defined as the experience of effectiveness and mastery. When course structures and expectations do not align with diverse approaches to information processing, autistic students may experience repeated competence frustration. Instructional designs that provide scaffolding, such as incremental deadlines, checklists, and explicit rubrics, support competence by enabling learners to monitor progress, reduce ambiguity, and build mastery. The encouragement to affirm autistic individuals' agency prepares them to assert their preferences confidently without shame or embarrassment.

Adopting universal design for learning (UDL) principles presenting information in multiple formats, breaking down complex tasks, and offering flexible demonstration of learning can enhance executive success (Barrera Ciurana & Moliner García, 2024). Explicit scaffolds ensure that autistic students' cognitive strengths are leveraged while reducing undue barriers that stem from rigid task structures. Autistic individuals experience heightened sensory sensitivities, including auditory, visual, and tactile differences (Robertson & Simmons, 2015). College classrooms, particularly large lecture halls or interactive learning spaces, may present unpredictable sensory stimuli such as background noise, bright lighting, crowded seating, and frequent environmental transitions.

Sensory overstimulation can increase stress, task disengagement, and fatigue among autistic students (Baczała & Wiese, 2025). For example, unpredictable noise levels during class discussions or rapid shifts between varied learning activities can precipitate sensory overload, leading students to withdraw or avoid participation. Extra time autistic students use managing sensory discomfort diverts cognitive resources away from academic tasks, diminishing learning outcomes (Price & Romualdez, 2025). Additionally, educational institutions are increasingly reversing the trend of digital, remote, and hybrid learning to adopt in-person, phone-free or reduced-phone classrooms to combat a "crisis of attention" and declining mental health students (Figl, Santiago Walser, Weber, & Remus, 2025). The surge in policies banning or restricting mobile devices is driven by data showing improved academic performance, reduced behavioral problems, and strengthened social connections in distraction-free environments (Kharazi, Sala, Bostelmann, & Kotseva, 2026). Abrupt phone removal can increase nomophobia or the fear of being without one's phone (Notara, Vagka, Gnardellis, & Lagiou, 2021). Autistic students requiring stim-positive environments during learning might feel more comfortable using a mobile device to record lectures, an artificial intelligence assistant to explain subject matter in real-time, or additional sensory soothing features to assist learning. Applications such as Fluid provide colorful visual fluid art while Habitca gamifies daily tasks (Autism Society of British Columbia, 2026). These applications often feature calming colors, repetitive movements, and gentle sounds designed for relaxation.

Sensory environments can influence all three SDT needs. Overstimulation can (a) undermine competence by reducing concentration and performance capacity, (b) hinder autonomy by forcing

avoidance behaviors, and (c) detract from relatedness when students feel misunderstood or unsupported in managing sensory stress. Supporting sensory needs through options such as quieter seating, controlled lighting, and predictable classroom routines offers students greater self-regulation and comfort, facilitating engagement (Nolan, Doyle, Lewis, & Treanor, 2023).

Practical sensory supports include offering noise-reducing headphones, clearly posted class agendas, predictable session formats, and access to nearby quiet spaces or sensory rooms for decompression. Involving autistic college students in designing sensory rooms meets their inclusion needs while improving emotional regulation and reducing sensory overload (Unwin, Powell, Jones, 2022). By involving them in choosing colors, textures, lighting, and calming tools, they gain a sense of agency, leading to better engagement and fewer, less intense, behavioral challenges (McCabe, Newbutt, Hutchinson, & Loetscher, 2025). Sensory accommodations not only benefit autistic students but also generates inclusive environments for students with diverse learning preferences. Deana Delp, an Associate Professor at Arizona State University in the Ira A. Fulton Schools of Engineering, provided an enhanced syllabus with general and in-practice accommodations for autistic students. To support autistic engineering students, instructors should break large, complex projects into smaller, scheduled milestones, ensuring all technical requirements are still met (Delp & Dixon, 2022). Key accommodations include providing clear, direct expectations, using hands-on/visual teaching methods, offering extended testing time, and pairing students with empathetic peer leaders to facilitate collaboration (Delp & Dixon, 2022).

The disparities outlined above illustrate the need to legitimize tools that support neurodivergent students' academic success. Digital planners, visual organizers, peer-mentoring apps, and communication scripts are examples of assistive tools that align with SDT by supporting autonomy (self-paced engagement), competence (enhanced task mastery), and relatedness (structured interaction protocols). When autistic students access tools tailored to their needs, they report increased confidence and academic participation (Locke et al., 2024). Recognizing these tools as legitimate educational supports rather than optional add-ons promotes equitable participation and respects neurodiversity as a dimension of human variation.

Educators play a pivotal role in shaping classroom climates for SDT needs (Locke et al., 2024). Institutional stakeholders share responsibility for learning outcomes by designing courses that anticipate diversity in learning styles, explicitly communicate expectations, and implement inclusive practices (Janse van Rensburg & Liang, 2025). Faculty development in neurodiversity awareness, structured instructional scaffolding, and flexible assessment can cultivate environments where autistic students thrive.

Inclusive classroom practices impact students beyond the academy. Autistic students who experience empowerment through effective support and recognition of their strengths navigate workplace challenges more effectively (Grenawalt et al., 2025). Faculty who create and enforce

inclusive pedagogies that model collaborative communication, respect for diverse thinking styles, and shared leadership mirror the competencies valued in progressive organizations (Randolph, Benigno, Markollari, & Cheak-Zamora, 2025). Conversely, persistent classroom exclusionary practices can reinforce stigma and reduce autistic graduates' confidence in workplace participation. By supporting SDT needs within management education, institutions contribute to reducing workplace intolerance and promoting neurodiversity as an asset in organizational contexts.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study included semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences and challenges of college students with neurodivergent tendencies' social interactions, executive functioning, and sensory sensitivities using self-determination theory (SDT). The researcher interviewed three neurodivergent individuals between ages 18 to 40 who completed at least one college level management course. The semi-structured interview format allowed in-depth exploration of the participants' views while providing flexibility to investigate interesting or unexpected themes that emerged during conversations. Including first-hand accounts of participants' experiences unlocks transferable knowledge. Relatable and measurable strategies for including and supporting neurodivergent individuals aligns with educational tool normality.

The study involved three individuals, including two current college students and one former college student. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse range of experiences and contexts regarding neurodivergence. The researcher intentionally employed a small sample size to cultivate deep, nuanced insights drawn from a select group of participants. Rather than aiming for broad generalization, as is common in quantitative research, this approach sought to honor the complexity of individual experiences. By prioritizing the depth and richness of the data over the number of participants, the researcher created space to meaningfully engage with each person's thoughts, emotions, and lived realities. Selecting college attendees ensured a spectrum of perspectives while still situating the study within a shared educational context.

Inclusion criteria involved individuals over the age of 18 years old, holding leadership positions for at least five years, with a demonstrated interest in or practice of vulnerable leadership. A semistructured interview guide helped the researcher ensure consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility for participants to express their thoughts freely. The interview guide included the following key questions:

1. What neurodivergent tendencies do you display? When were you diagnosed?
2. What challenges did you experience in the management classroom setting?
3. What is your communication style?
4. What accommodations are or were helpful for your success in the management classroom setting? Who supported you?
5. What advice would you offer college students about navigating neurodivergence?

Potential participants were identified through professional networks, industry conferences, and social media platforms. The researcher invited potential participants via e-mail outlining the study's purpose, the nature of their involvement, and the expected time commitment. Participants who expressed interest in the study received an informed consent form detailing the study's aims, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Participants were required to sign and return the consent form before scheduling the interview. Interviews were conducted via video conferencing platforms (e.g., Google Recorder) to accommodate participants from various geographical locations. Each audio recorded interview lasted approximately 30 minutes with the participant's permission. During the interviews, the researcher followed the semi-structured interview guide, asking follow-up questions as needed to clarify or expand on participant responses. Field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details.

This study adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Participants' confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning pseudonyms and securely storing data. Informed consent was obtained, and participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

The researcher investigated the experiences from individuals with neurodivergent tendencies in the college management classroom. The researcher did not limit the time to answer questions or coerce the participants in any manner. The following interview questions shed light on the tools neurodivergent individuals use to successfully complete college management courses. Separate audio interviews were conducted via Google Recorder with Participant #1, a current student at a private university in Connecticut, Participant #2, a current student at a technical college in Tennessee, and Participant #3, a former college student and current autism advocate in Maryland. For interview question #1, what neurodivergent tendencies do you display, when were you diagnosed, Participant #1 stated:

> In my work experience, I have AuDHD. I have known about my diagnosis since childhood. For question #2, what challenges did you experience in the management classroom setting,

Participant #1 responded:

> The biggest hurdles usually come from executive functioning demands. Sometimes I feel overwhelmed by long lectures, group projects where roles are unclear, or shifting expectations that are not written down. Fast-paced discussions can also be difficult because it is hard to process information and contribute at the same time.

For question #3, what is your communication style, Participant #1 stated:

> I am very direct and literal. When asked to write or answer a question, I prefer time to process and do better when I can follow up in writing or meet 1:1. I am comfortable in structured conversations but get lost when things become unstructured and move too quickly.

Question #4, what accommodations are or were helpful for your success in the management classroom setting, who supported you, prompted Participant #1 to pause for a moment. Participant #1 responded:

> I benefit from clear agendas, written expectations, and the chance to look at slides or assignments ahead of time. Having flexibility around seating or being able to use noise reduction tools can make a big difference. Extended time on tests or flexibility with deadlines also helps. Support usually comes from a mix of disability services staff, faculty who are willing to adjust, and mentors or peers who check in and reinforce strategies.

For question #5, what advice would you offer college students about navigating neurodivergence, Participant #1 responded:

> Know yourself and what makes learning possible for you. Communicate those needs early instead of waiting until things get too overwhelming. Build routines that make daily life easier and take away the pressure of constant decision making. Remember that asking for accommodations is not about getting special treatment, it is about creating an equal opportunity to succeed. Most importantly, lean into the strengths that come with neurodivergence, whether that is creativity, resilience, or the ability to see problems differently.

Participant #2 included their experience as a former college student at a technical college in Tennessee. For question #1, what neurodivergent tendencies do you display? When were you diagnosed? Participant #2 stated:

> I have AuDHD. I was diagnosed as a freshman in high school. I remember having a lot of trouble staying focused because of loud noises and other people talking in the classroom. Stuff like bells, clocks ticking, and not being able to keep up with taking notes while the teacher lectured made it difficult to keep up.

For question #2, what challenges did you experience in the management classroom setting, Participant #2 responded:

> Time to process and understand what the professor meant in their lecture and having enough time to complete more difficult assignments were necessary for me. I preferred using my phone to take notes, but sometimes the professor asked us to put our phones away if it was distracting. I don't like it when the professor told long stories or rambled. It was easier to go over the material and ask more direct questions such as "what is this definition?" and "could you use it in a sentence?".

For question #3, what is your communication style, Participant #2 stated:

> I prefer direct communication. At times I can talk fast when I am excited, but I can self-regulate when I have a sensory toy. We were allowed to have those. I did well when I was

> able to work by myself because I had accommodations that allowed me to do that in the classroom.

For question #4, what accommodations are or were helpful for your success in the management classroom setting, who supported you, Participant #2 stated:

> My main accommodations were being able to work alone and having extra time to complete tests. My mom is my biggest supporter. I still text her when I get overwhelmed.

For question #5, what advice would you offer college students about navigating neurodivergence, Participant #2 stated:

> I would say establishing a routine and a backup plan. I used Google Calendar and set reminders for assignments or project due dates. Having a set schedule helped me out a lot. If I didn't have a set schedule, I would have been lost.
>
> Participant #3 shared their experience as a current college student at a technical college in

Tennessee. For question #1, what neurodivergent tendencies do you display? When were you diagnosed? Participant #3 stated:

> I have dyslexia and am diagnosed with Level 1 ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder). I was diagnosed in middle school at age 13. Math and numbers, in general, are confusing for me, so I have had tutoring for those classes. It is not as bad as it used to be, but basically, I still need help understanding how the numbers fit into formulas. I tend to overthink and that slows me down.

For question #2, what challenges did you experience in the management classroom setting, Participant #3 responded:

> I have some challenges such as managing my time and taking notes. I am glad that most of my teachers record their lectures so I can review them when I need to. I can work in a group, but I tell my classmates to be patient with me due to my dyslexia. I used to not talk much because of it, but my parents got me a speech coach to help me. In my supervisory studies class, we are required to give constructive feedback in front of the class like managers conversing with employees. It has helped me be more comfortable in front of others.

For question #3, what is your communication style, Participant #3 stated:

> I like one on one conversations in a quiet room. I am not usually the first person to talk. I open up when I know the person's intentions. Sarcasm annoys me or when people tell long jokes.

For question #4, what accommodations are or were helpful for your success in the management classroom setting, who supported you, Participant #2 stated:

> I get extra time on tests and homework. Like I said earlier, the recorded lectures help me a lot. I get support from friends and family. I am more independent now than when I was a kid.

For question #5, what advice would you offer college students about navigating neurodivergence, Participant #3 stated:

> Stay strong and ask for help when you need it.

The researcher transcribed all interview data to preserve the precision and integrity of participants' responses. Each transcript was systematically reviewed alongside the corresponding audio recording to correct inaccuracies and incorporate relevant non-verbal cues and contextual details. The verified transcripts were subsequently imported into qualitative data analysis software (e.g., NVivo) to facilitate systematic coding. The researcher developed an initial coding framework deductively from the interview protocol and the study's guiding research objectives. Open coding helped the researcher identify salient concepts, patterns, and emergent themes, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model of thematic analysis. These phases comprised data familiarization, generation of initial codes, theme development, theme review, theme definition and naming, and the production of the final analytical synthesis. To enhance credibility, participants were provided with a summary of the preliminary findings to confirm the accuracy of interpretations. Triangulation was achieved through cross-case comparison of data derived from multiple participants and contexts. Additionally, the researcher engaged in regular peer debriefing sessions to refine the coding structure and further validate the emergent themes.

Three themes emerged from the interviews including accommodation, routine refinement, and accountability. All three participants emphasized the need for accommodation but not limitation. Common accommodations included more time to process information consumed, complete work, and prepare for lectures. Participant #1 and Participant #3 shared the need to record lectures to better understand concepts discussed in the classroom. Technology, including applications like Google Recorder, Alexa, Siri, Otter.ai, and Evernote incorporate artificial intelligence to improve note translation. Participant #3 expressed the need for personalized instruction with mathematics. Course instructors accommodating time to process and complete tasks improved all participants' experiences in management courses. All participants agreed that accommodations supplemented their class experience rather than eliminating their agency to participate.

Refining routines for autistic students navigating college management classrooms means advocating intentional efforts to include assistive technology and stakeholder support. Autistic college students in one study on developmental context of college for emerging adulthood reported difficulty exercising daily living functions and social skills (Flegenheimer & Scherf, 2022). Interventions largely focus on social skills in a vacuum without considering the greater benefits of building them in routines (Flegenheimer & Scherf, 2022). Predictability creates a sense of safety

and control, minimizing distress from unexpected changes common in college. All participants cited support from family and loved ones to help them stay on track. Participant #2 emphasized the importance of having a safe person they could communicate with when they felt overwhelmed.

Reinforcing coping mechanisms allowed Participant #2 to concentrate on difficult business coursework, time management, and problem-solving. Less time worrying about unforeseen challenges helped all participants feel confident reaching out for support, not motivation. Successfully navigating structured routines builds self-efficacy, crucial for managing independence in business courses (Ghanouni & Quirke, 2023). Consistent structure helps prevent stress and meltdowns, fostering better emotional management (Lewis & Stevens, 2023). Some autistic meltdowns occur when individuals feel overwhelmed with emotions, stress, or fear (Lewis & Stevens, 2023).

Greater emphasis on early detection of autistic traits in children allows stakeholders to target intervention (Forbes, Kent, Charman, Baird, Pickles, & Simonoff, 2023). All participants were diagnosed with autism as children, with Participant #2 being diagnosed later as a teenager. While most technological tools to assist autistic college students were developed in the last 10 years, early detection of autistic traits begins with education and consideration.

CONCLUSION

Young autistic adults continue to need significant support from their families or outside services as they move into adulthood. They are much more likely than their peers to be unemployed, with employment rates at 50% versus 78% for non-autistic young adults (Yon-Hernández et al., 2025). Despite support from friends and family, less autistic young adults live independently compared to non-autistic young adults in the general population. Autistic adults are three times more likely to have no close friends and physical health markers tend to be lower, highlighting ongoing gaps in support and inclusion (Forbes et al., 2023). These challenges highlight the need for more resources in the autistic college student community.

In conclusion, more resources deployed in college management classrooms can impact autistic college business students in meaningful ways. Autistic college students' shared journeys beyond acceptance and inclusion empower them to manage their success. Visibility empowers autistic college students by fostering self-advocacy, reducing stigma, and facilitating tailored support, such as sensory-friendly spaces and visual schedules. By visibly identifying needs, institutions can normalize the expectation of resources, social connections, and the validation of inclusive environments for neurodiverse students.

Limitations

Limitations of this study included the nuanced characteristics of neurodivergent management students in higher education, the small sample size for interviews, and limited guidance on best practices for performance in neurotypical classrooms. Neurodivergence reflects differing needs and requirements for individuals. Broad generalizations only hurt individuals seeking understanding and respect for their situation. Budgetary constraints and inadequate leadership may contribute more to the lack of supportive resources for autistic college students rather than inconsideration. The small sample size allowed for deeper, intimate conversations surrounding the needs of autistic college students. A larger sample might have provided the researcher with the ability to discover shared experiences and requests of autistic college students. Limited knowledge of best practices for navigating neurodivergent students' academic and personal success often excludes students at the administrative level. Collectively, these limitations provide challenges for more robust progress.

Future Implications

Higher graduation rates for autistic students occur when management education shifts from a deficit-based model to an empowerment model (Kenney, Sreckovic, & Schultz, 2026). This shift will likely produce leaders with enhanced technical, analytical, and ethical skills, who are trained to leverage diverse cognitive styles. Future researchers could develop tools to help institutions conduct policy audits through a neurodivergent lens to reveal where barriers persist, assess methods in a pilot program to set the tone for practices in other programs, and establish peer, staff, and faculty ambassadors to resolve outcome deficits.

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