THE CIA CLIMATE FOR NEURODIVERSITY SURVEY REPORT (2023-2024)

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FALL 2023 STUDENT SURVEY

As part of the Nord Center for Teaching and Learning's efforts to better understand the challenges, needs, and positions of the large population of neurodivergent (ND) students at CIA, a student survey was deployed in the Fall of 2023. This was the first probe out to students as the beginning stage of a larger initiative to encourage inclusivity and resist ableism on campus.

Summary: This report indicates areas for understanding and development, including issues with diagnosis, consistent and impactful accommodations and support services, perceptions of challenge, and experiences with different campus spaces. Because respondents included both students who **identified** as neurodivergent (ND) and neurotypical (NT), this report provides some areas of comparison in experience and perception. Importantly, this report demonstrates that all students experience challenges and want support, but these challenging experiences and support needs are different and amplified for neurodivergent individuals.
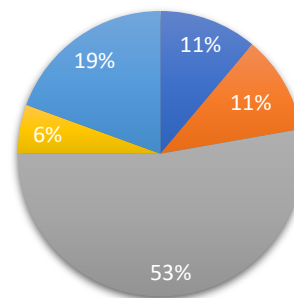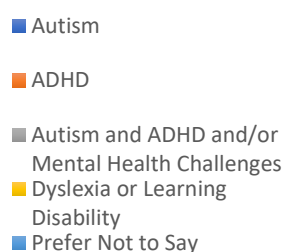
SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Total Respondents: 62
Year at CIA: First Year: 15**,** Second Year: 19**,** Third Year: 18**,** Fourth Year: 9**,** Fifth Year or Beyond: 1
Major Areas of Study: All areas of study were represented with the largest representation in **Animation (23%)** and **Illustration (26%)**

PARTICIPATION OF NEURODIVERGENT INDIVIDUALS

- 57.8% of respondents self-identified as Neurodivergent (ND) (N=36)
    - 97.8% of ND respondents either have a confirmed diagnosis or are actively in the process of receiving a diagnosis.
    - 73% of ND respondents had a ND diagnosis prior to starting college.
- 25.8% of respondents were unsure of whether they were neurodivergent or neurotypical. (N=16)
- 16.1% of respondents self-identified as Neurotypical (NT). (N=10)

Diagnoses for ND Respondents

- Autism — 11%
- ADHD — 11%
- Autism and ADHD and/or Mental Health Challenges — 53%
- Dyslexia or Learning Disability — 6%
- Prefer Not to Say — 19%

DIAGNOSIS AND ROADBLOCKS TO ACCOMMODATIONS

Respondents who identified as ND were asked if they had been prevented or delayed from receiving support from Accessibility and Disability services while at CIA due to lack of formal diagnosis. **While nearly 75% of ND students had a diagnosis prior to starting college, many other students did not have a formal diagnosis, which can create barriers to receiving support.**

Of the respondents who did not yet have a diagnosis, nearly half said that they have been blocked from support services due to the lack of diagnosis. One respondent provided a written explanation for their answer to this question stating:

> *"I HAVEN'T GONE TO SUPPORT BECAUSE I AM NOT DIAGNOSED YET.*
> *NOT [BECAUSE] I DON'T NEED SUPPORT."*

The results for this question point to a larger issue among neurodivergent individuals. The diagnosis process, especially as an adult, for ADHD and Autism in particular, can take months or even years. Data for adult-specific wait times are difficult to track down, but for children, a 2023 study conducted by the former president of The Autism Society of America revealed that of the specialty care centers they surveyed, **25% report waitlists for diagnostic assessments for Autism that are longer than six months,** while 21% report waitlists of longer than one-year (i).

This same study notes that, shockingly, **there are only about 11 child & adolescent psychiatrists for every 100,000 children**. Compounding the issue of scarce resources is the historically inaccessible cost of diagnosis and assessment.

Individuals with access to health insurance may see lower out-of-pocket costs, but for populations who may not have access to insurance, like college students, costs for a formal diagnosis can range into the thousands. Autistic Adults NYC notes an individual spending around $3600 for their diagnosis.[ii] **And, notably, individuals assigned female and birth and people of color have greater difficulty receiving a diagnosis[iii].**
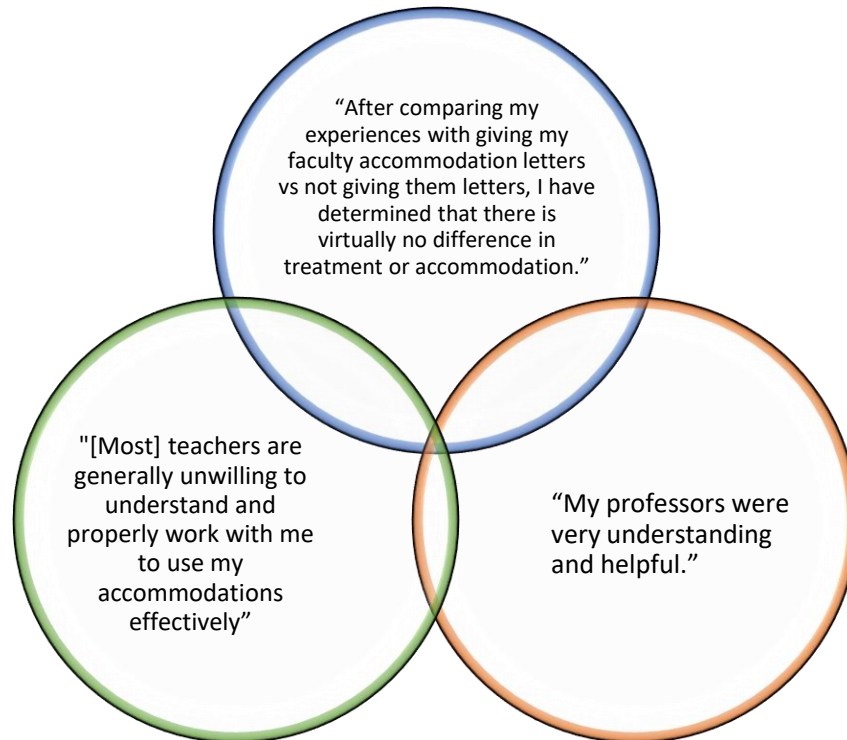
EXPERIENCES WITH ACCOMMODATIONS

Considering the big picture roadblocks to diagnosis, it is important to understand how ND students, especially those without a formal diagnosis access accommodations at CIA. The survey asked if students had filed for accommodations with CIA and what their experience with accommodations has been like.

Of students who have a formal diagnosis:
- 66% have filed for accommodations, but only 45% provided an accommodation letter to faculty.
- 41% reported a mostly positive experience with getting support for their accommodations.
- 35% reported mixed experiences.
- 24% indicated their experience receiving accommodations has been mostly negative.

Students noted inconsistency in classroom policies – some instructors were flexible, while others were not. Some students indicated frustration, while others expressed their gratitude for the support they received. Some responses point to possible areas for further clarification and improvement in the accommodations process.

"After comparing my experiences with giving my faculty accommodation letters vs not giving them letters, I have determined that there is virtually no difference in treatment or accommodation."

"[Most] teachers are generally unwilling to understand and properly work with me to use my accommodations effectively"

"My professors were very understanding and helpful."

Access to accommodations is only one factor contributing to more equitable experiences for ND or disabled students. Revising guidelines for receiving accommodations could help some of the students who aren't feeling supported. In general, though, there is a need for more accessible classroom design. Implementing the principles of Universal Design, which were reviewed at the CIA Fall 2023 Teaching Summit, is a great way to increase inclusivity. Sheryl Burgstahler from University of Washington notes that

"UD IS BENEFICIAL TO ALL STUDENTS, NOT JUST STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES; FOR EXAMPLE, PEOPLE WHO FACE CHALLENGES RELATED TO SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS, RACE, CULTURE, GENDER, AGE, AND LANGUAGE ALSO BENEFIT FROM UD PRACTICES" (iv).

Without access to or consistent application of accommodations, ND students are not receiving an equitable experience in their classes.

CHALLENGES WITH ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES

Students were asked their perceived level of challenge with these aspects of academic experiences:

- Attending regularly and on time
- Staying engaged
- Meeting multiple deadlines across classes
- Large group discussion
- Small group discussion/work
- Collaborative work with peers
- Understanding assignments
- Managing emotions
- Navigating sensory inputs
- Asking questions
- Presenting work to the class

All students reported moderate challenges across these areas, except for sensory issues (neurotypical students reported no challenges with these). Compared to their neurotypical peers, **neurodivergent students had lower rates of moderate challenge** in asking questions, small- and large-group discussion, presenting work to the class, and collaborative work with peers. However, more **neurodivergent students reported moderate challenge in several areas** compared to their neurotypical peers, particularly in **managing emotions, understanding assignments, staying engaged, and navigating sensory inputs.**

Perceptions of Moderate Challenge in the Classroom
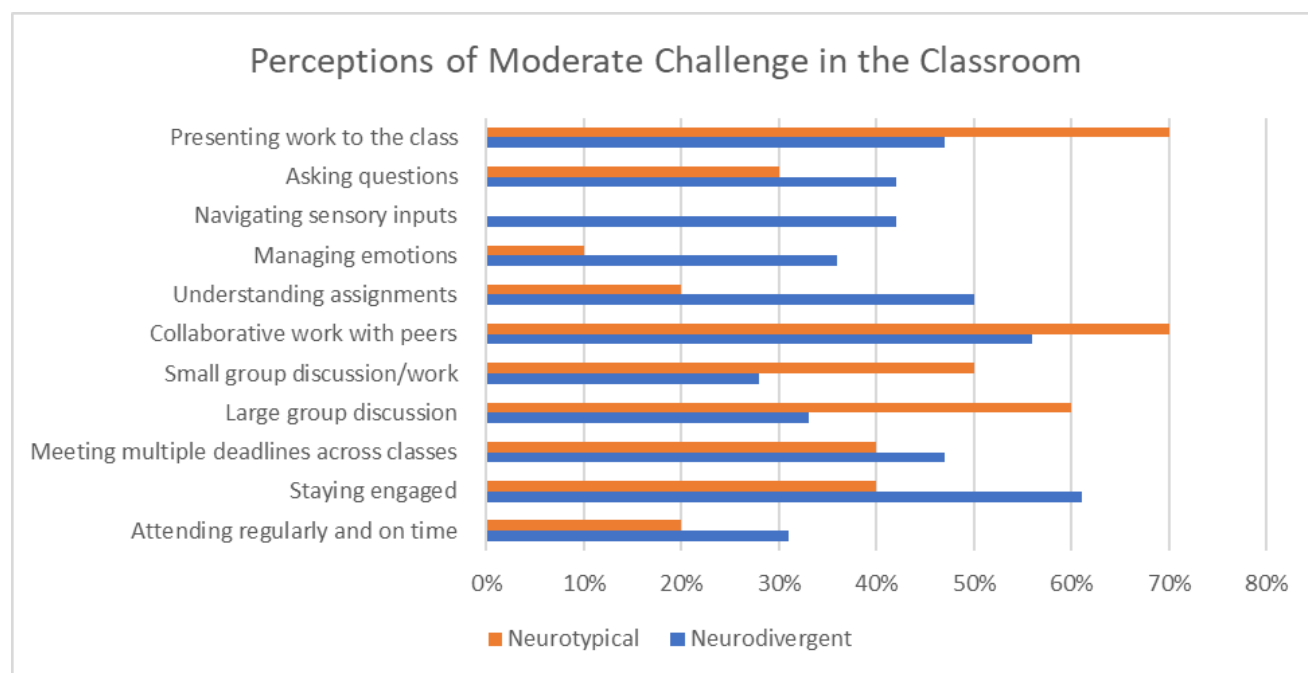
In-class engagement is a challenge for all respondents

Sensory issues, multiple deadlines, and emotions are challenges for ND respondents, not NT respondents.

NT respondents are more challenged by collaborative work, discussions, and presentations than ND respondents.

ND STUDENTS HAVE HEIGHTENED CHALLENGES, ESPECIALLY WITH <u>INDIVIDUAL</u> EXPERIENCES

Combining the data on both moderate and high challenge illuminates how ND students experience heightened challenges in comparison to NT students, particularly for individual experiences. **ND students reported greater perceptions of moderate-to-high challenge in individual experiences** than their neurotypical peers, particularly in the following areas: meeting multiple deadlines across classes (89%), staying engaged in class (86%), navigating sensory inputs (83%), and navigating emotions (75%).
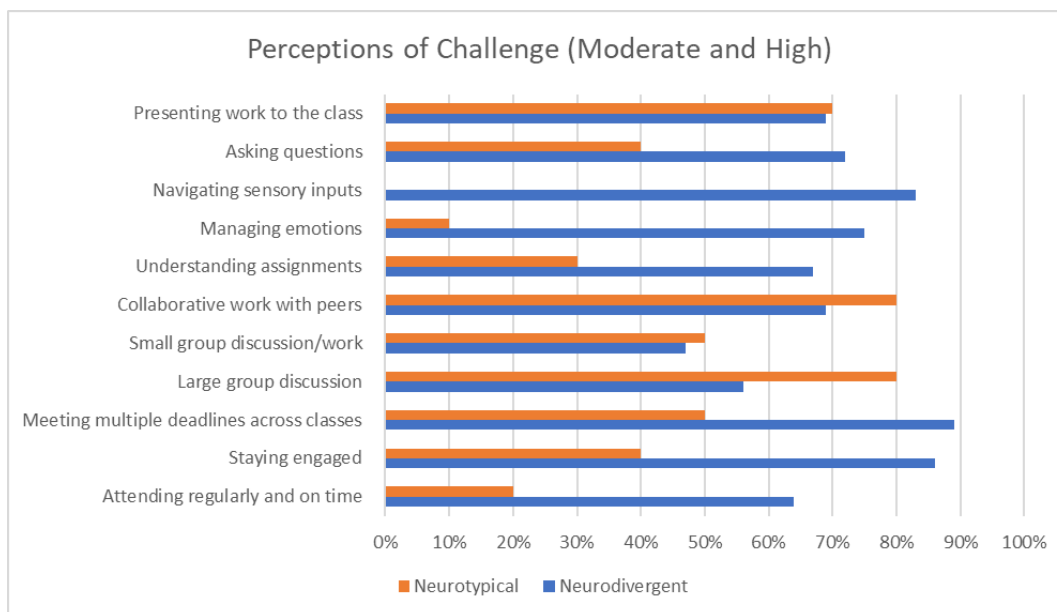
Students provided important context for these challenges. They explained that their **ability to engage** relies heavily on the conditions of the specific class, day, and population. One student noted the importance of representation of neurodivergent peers:

> "FOR MANY OF THE TOPICS THAT INVOLVE SOCIAL INTERACTION DURING CLASS, IT HEAVILY DEPENDS ON WHO IS IN THE ROOM WITH ME/WHO MY AUDIENCE IS. **IF THERE ARE MOSTLY OTHER NEURODIVERGENT PEOPLE, MOST SOCIAL INTERACTIONS ARE NOT A PROBLEM AT ALL.** IF THERE ARE MOSTLY NEUROTYPICAL PEOPLE, I AM MUCH LESS COMFORTABLE SHARING, BECAUSE I AM AFRAID OF CAUSING MISCOMMUNICATIONS."

Students also noted the **unique experience of critique** citing a need for more resources and help preparing for how critiques will go. In general, feedback was provided about a desire for clearer instructions, guidelines, and expectations for classroom practices:

> "I FIND IT VERY CHALLENGING TO SPEAK IN CRITIQUES BECAUSE IT IS UNCOMFORTABLE AND AWKWARD. WE ALSO HAD **NO RESOURCES TO LEARN HOW CRITIQUES SHOULD GO**."

> "I STRUGGLE **UNDERSTANDING WHAT IS TRULY NEEDED FOR A PROJECT** SOMETIMES AND HAVE A HARD TIME GETTING THINGS DONE FOR THAT REASON."

USE OF SUPPORT SERVICES AT CIA

Students were asked about support services they have used while at CIA. These included accessibility and disability services, academic advising, the Writing + Learning Center, university counseling services (through Case Western Reserve University), the CARE form, and 1:1, personalized academic support (time management, perfectionism, procrastination, note-taking).
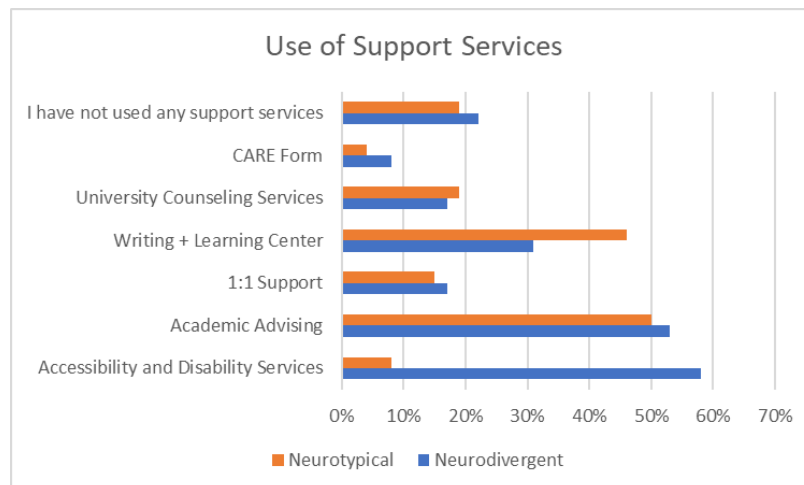
All respondents reported using a range of support services at CIA. Only 20% of respondents had not used ANY of the support services listed on the survey. The most-utilized support service reported was Academic Advising.

STUDENT SENTIMENT ABOUT SUPPORT SERVICE EXPERIENCES

Respondents were asked to rate the quality of support received through CIA support services. While only 4% rated their experiences with support services as entirely negative, half rated their experience as mixed, pointing to inconsistency in the efficacy of utilized support services.

For ND students, the act of seeking support can entail additional challenges due to experiences of executive dysfunction. Executive function is a term describing skills of goal-directed behaviors and regulated thinking, such as planning, time management, emotional regulation, task initiation, and self-awareness. Executive dysfunction can mean that even the task of knowing where to begin a process can be a major challenge, as described by one respondent:

> "OFTEN, GETTING SUPPORT REQUIRES A LOT OF PLANNING AND SCHEDULING THINGS IN ADVANCE. THAT IS VERY DIFFICULT FOR SOMEONE WITH ADHD WHO ALSO HAS TO THINK ABOUT KEEPING UP WITH CLASSWORK."

Understanding these aspects of neurodivergence can be helpful in both seeking and offering support. The Cleveland Clinic provides helpful guidelines for understanding Executive Dysfunction.

Respondents also described a need for greater or modified support services to address the unique need of ND individuals:

> "NOT EVERYBODY IS CAPABLE OF LEARNING THE SAME WAY OTHERS DO—AND ONE OF THE POINTS OF EVEN HAVING ACCOMMODATIONS IS TO HELP YOU LEARN IN WAY YOUR UNIQUE BRAIN UNDERSTANDS"

Several students agreed that faculty and staff are mostly well-intentioned and care about their wellbeing but wanted greater consistency and impact of support offered. Many comments pointed at systems being under supported and overtaxed, noting that they felt staff were working with the "bare minimum," and leading to challenges in making appointments, particular for counseling services.

> "THE INTENTIONS WERE GOOD BUT SOMETIMES THE AID MISSED THE MARK"

CAMPUS SPACES AND PERCEPTION OF SUPPORT

Students report mixed experiences of support in different environments. They were asked to indicate feelings about their level of support (adequate, inadequate, unsure) about campus spaces.
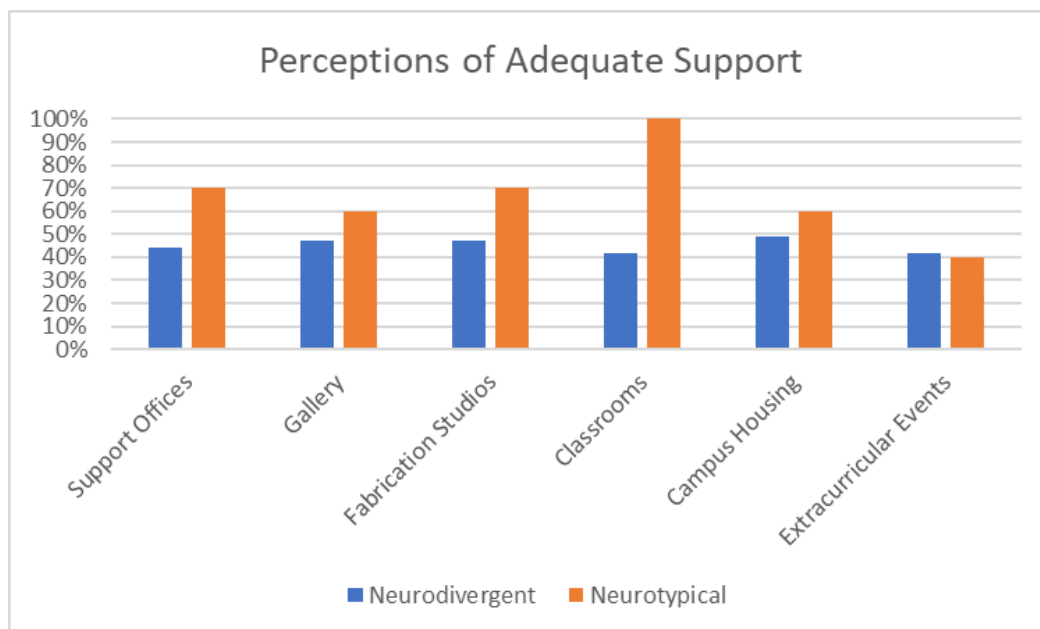
Neurotypical students reported greater perceptions of adequate support in most environments, **with 100% feeling adequately supported in the classroom, compared to only 42% of their neurodivergent peers.**

Neurodivergent students reported much higher rates of inadequate support across several areas. More than a quarter of neurodivergent students reported perceptions of inadequate support in fabrication studios, classrooms, support offices, and campus housing.
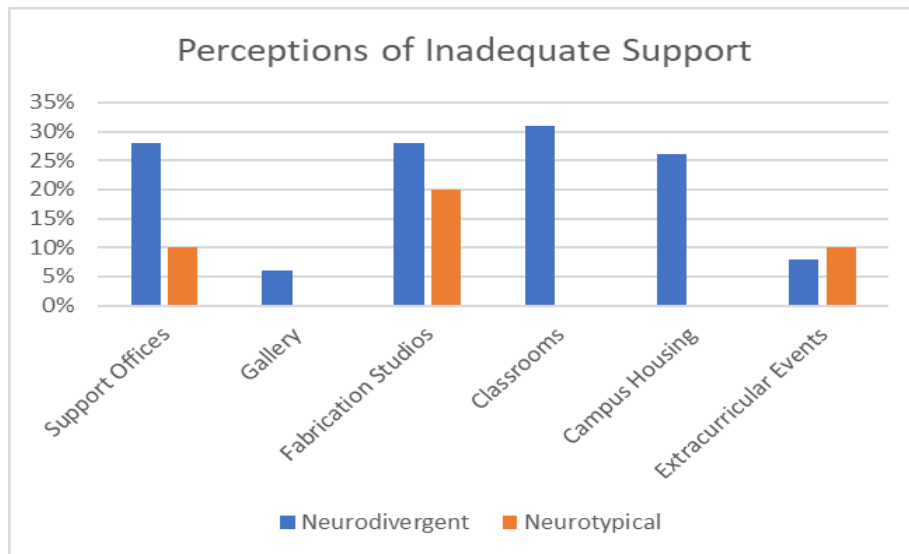
Student respondents provided important context for these inadequate ratings, with many noting sensory issues (particularly lighting and noise) and navigating challenging tasks or new technologies.

AWARENESS OF AND ABILITY TO RESPOND TO NEURODIVERGENT NEEDS INCLUDING MELTDOWN OR SHUTDOWN

In addition to questions about support in academic and campus spaces, the survey asked respondents a series of questions about support for ND needs in the event of meltdown or shutdown.

When asked about their personal knowledge of meltdown or shutdown, nearly all (both ND and NT) respondents reported that they have some understanding of these needs and about half indicated that they understand these needs very well.

While students felt mostly knowledgeable about meltdown and shutdown, when asked if they felt faculty was prepared to support students in these scenarios, respondents demonstrated less confidence.
- **Over half of respondents answered "No," they didn't think faculty were prepared to support students with meltdown or shutdown.**
- Only 16% answered "Yes," they believe faculty was prepared to support ND student needs.

Neurodivergent students were also asked if they feel safe/supported at school if they experience meltdown or shutdown.
- **30% said "No," they didn't feel safe or supported in the event of meltdown or shutdown.**
- 41% were "Unsure" if they were safe or supported in the event of meltdown or shutdown.
- Others (about 17%) said they don't experience these issues and 11% said "Yes."

Responses to these questions point to a need for greater education about how to respond to meltdown or shutdown both on an individual level and among faculty and staff.

OVERALL CALL FOR INCLUSIVITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

The responses to this survey point to a call for initiatives in favor of inclusivity and accessibility across CIA. During the 2023-2024 academic year, The Nord Center for Teaching and Learning has:

- Built a learning community (LC) of faculty and staff to investigate neurodiversity. LC is working on programming for 2024-2025 that will address some of the needs that have been uncovered because of the findings reported here.
- Held a ND-focused TRI conversation this spring (2024) to encourage sharing and connection across populations at CIA.
- Facilitated two focus groups to expand on survey data in the areas of sensory experiences and accommodations

Overall, this report points to some specific opportunities for continued growth and education including:

- **Review and/or revision of the accommodations process** to provide greater access to accommodations to students without the burden of a formal diagnosis.
- **Greater education** for both faculty and staff and students about the scope of support available through accommodations.
- **Partnership across departments** to provide programming for neurodiverse students to learn better coping strategies and self-advocacy.
- **Increased visibility of ND experiences** through continued education sessions in partnership with both the Nord Center and external artists/creators.
- **Overall increased empathy** for the needs and realities of ND individuals (both students and faculty and staff).

REFERENCES

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[ii] *Adult Diagnosis*. (n.d.). Autistic Adults NYC. Retrieved March 24, 2024, from https://www.autisticadultsnyc.org/diagnosis

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[iv] Burgstahler, S. (n.d.). *Accommodations and Universal Design | DO-IT*. Www.washington.edu. https://www.washington.edu/doit/accommodations-and-universal-design