

Work-in-Progress: Neurodivergence and Intersecting Demographics Among Engineering Students

Abstract

The population of neurodivergent (ND) students in engineering programs is a topic of growing interest and importance in both academia and industry. Neurodivergence encompasses a range of neurological differences, including but not limited to autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, and dyspraxia. This diverse group of students brings unique perspectives, skills, and challenges to engineering education and the workforce. Understanding and supporting neurodivergent students is crucial for promoting inclusivity and diversity in engineering. This paper summarizes existing literature on the prevalence of neurodivergent students. This is followed by data from a large public institution, exploring the extent to which undergraduate engineering students self-identified as neurodivergent. Among over 1000 students, 18% identified as neurodivergent, 19% as maybe neurodivergent, and 62% as not neurodivergent (and therefore neurotypical). Junior and senior students were given the opportunity to self-identify types of neurodivergence, with ADHD and anxiety found as the most common write-in responses. A number of students identified multiple conditions. A higher percentage of female compared to male students self-identified as ND or maybe ND. Large percentages of students who indicated a gender that was not male or female also self-identified as neurodivergent. Similar percentages of White and Hispanic/Latinx first-year students identified as neurotypical; a higher percentage of Asian students identified as neurotypical. The results indicate that studies on the experiences of neurodivergent students in engineering should consider intersectional demographics. Given the significant percentages of engineering students identifying as ND, faculty should work to ensure these students are supported.

Background

Neurodivergence is a framework that recognizes that there are differences in how human brains function, and that these “alternative thinking styles” can convey advantages (Szulc et al., 2021). This asset-based framing recognizes the natural spectrum of human traits and abilities. It also pushes back on a medical model that frames differences as deficiencies and contributes to stigmatizing neurodivergence (Shaw, 2021). The neurodivergence framework acknowledges the limitations of formal diagnosis and allows individuals to self-identify as neurodivergent (ND) or not (Bertilsson et al., 2023; Eagle and Ringland, 2023). Classically, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, and dyspraxia are considered types of neurodivergence. We recognize that the medical terminology and naming of conditions carry the derogatory labels of disorders, deficiencies, and disabilities. As an example to push back on this labeling, some individuals prefer the term "autistic" to emphasize their individuality and reduce stereotypes and discrimination (Taboas et al., 2022). Other conditions may co-occur or be symptoms of ND, while some individuals consider these stand-alone types of ND (e.g., anxiety). From an equity and human capital perspective, engineering education must consider the experiences of ND students and create systems and environments to support their success.

Research in higher education alludes to a lack of awareness among faculty of the prevalence of ND, holding deficiency models of ND, and a lack of practices to support ND students (Carballo et al. 2021, Cook et al. 2009, Vance and Weyandt 2008). Sniatecki et al. (2015) found that faculty have more “negative attitudes toward students with mental health disabilities and learning

disabilities than towards students with physical disabilities” (p. 259). Vance and Weyandt (2008) found that only 48.6% of the faculty disagreed that “College students with ADHD have a lower grade point average than non-ADHD college students” (p. 306). Further, it is unclear if the situation has improved measurably from 1985 when Faigel (1985) reported that “some colleges still have faculty who believe that a student smart enough to be there could not be disabled” (p. 18). While these studies have not looked specifically at engineering, it is a concern if engineering faculty possess similar views.

Historically, the culture of engineering has been highly selective, with narrow conceptualizations of appropriate knowledge, standards, merit, and rigor (Blair-Loy and Cech, 2022; Riley, 2017; Slaton, 2010). This culture and associated practices in engineering have contributed to the skewed demographics of engineering students concerning race/ethnicity (Slaton, 2010). Faculty notions that engineering has rigorous selection standards intersecting with perceiving neurodivergence as a deficiency may lead some to assume that there are few neurodivergent students in engineering. Therefore, it is important to provide data that gives engineering faculty accurate information and raises their awareness of neurodivergence.

Data on the prevalence of neurodivergent students in engineering were not found. Data on ND among college students overall have been reported. The prevalence of different types of ND and medical conditions among entering full-time, first-time, first-year students in colleges around the U.S. in fall 2022 (among 33,039 students) were: 2.1% ASD, 13.2% ADHD, 5.5% learning disability (dyslexia, etc.), 20.7% psychological conditions (depression, PTSD, etc.), and 4.1% chronic illness (cancer, diabetes, autoimmune disorders, etc.) (HERI, 2023). Because the level of overlap and multiple diagnoses among these students was not reported, the percentage of ND students could be 20 to 42%. A higher percentage of males than females had ASD (2.5% vs. 1.3%) and ADHD (14.9% vs. 12.2%); a higher percentage of females than males had psychological conditions (26.0% vs. 10.8%) and chronic illness (5.0% vs. 2.6%) (HERI, 2023). In 2013, research showed that 1 in 160 U.S. college students reported having been diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder (Roux et al., 2013). In the same year, the prevalence rate of ASD among college students in China was reported as 0.1% (Wei et al., 2013), which is lower than the prevalence rates reported in Western countries. More recent studies show that as of 2023, around 1 in 36 eight-year-old children in the U.S. have been diagnosed with autism (Maenner, et al., 2023). Mak et al. (2021) found that 18.8% of college students in the U.S. had ADHD (higher than the HERI data); a slightly higher percentage of female students had ADHD (but the difference was not statistically significant). Over half of the students with ADHD had another condition (commonly generalized anxiety disorder, major depressive disorder) (Mak et al., 2021). Another study found that first-year college students with ADHD were more likely to experience feelings of depression (Hotez et al., 2022). The diagnosis of ADHD has been increasing over time, and underdiagnosis in females and minoritized populations is suspected (Abdelnour et al., 2022).

Because the data reported in the literature on the prevalence of ND are not specific to engineering, this research explored the prevalence of neurodivergence among engineering students. Being ‘non-normative’ in engineering in multiple ways and intersectionality with ND are likely to pose additional challenges for students. Thus, the prevalence of ND among different demographic groups was also explored.

Research Questions

The research questions explored in this work-in-progress study are listed below:

- RQ1. What percentage of engineering students self-identify as neurodivergent, maybe neurodivergent, and not neurodivergent?
- RQ2. What types of neurodivergence do ND engineering students self-identify?
- RQ3. What is the prevalence of self-identified ND among engineering students of different sex or gender?
- RQ4. What is the prevalence of self-identified ND among engineering students of different racial/ethnic groups?

Methods

In this exploratory study, surveys were distributed at the University of Colorado Boulder (a large public R1 institution). Students were asked to self-identify if they were neurodivergent (e.g., ADHD, Autism spectrum): no, maybe, or yes. This question was the last among a series of demographic items. In the surveys distributed to juniors and seniors, students were invited to write in their types of neurodivergence. Other demographic items were included in the surveys. The surveys asked students to select the gender with which they most identified: male, female, prefer to self-describe (write-in optional), or prefer not to respond. Students were also asked to select racial/ethnic identifiers which they use to describe themselves. Note that on all of the surveys, students could elect not to answer the questions, in addition to being provided the opportunity to indicate that they preferred not to answer. All of the surveys were administered online via Qualtrics. The ND demographic question was added to surveys distributed in courses for other purposes (e.g., studies of identity, belonging, innovation self-efficacy). Courses included in this study include two different engineering courses for first-year (FY) students, environmental engineering courses for junior/senior students, and a general engineering course for upper-division students. The surveys were distributed at the end of the semester in spring 2023 and the beginning of the semester in fall 2023 and spring 2024. Response rates across the courses ranged from 39% (spring 2023 post) to 93%. The data were collected as part of multiple research projects approved by the Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research.

Statistical tests were used to evaluate differences observed among the percentage of students self-identifying as neurodivergent among demographic groups. The largest demographic group was used as a comparator (i.e., male for sex/gender or White for race/ethnicity). Counts of ND or maybe ND were pooled and compared to not ND. Fisher's exact tests were conducted, with two-tailed p values of 0.05 or less indicating a high degree of confidence of statistically significant differences between the groups being compared.

Results

RQ1. Prevalence of ND Engineering Students

The results of our survey describing the prevalence of neurodivergent (ND) engineering students are summarized in Table 1. At the University of Colorado Boulder, the percentage of neurotypical (NT) students ranged from 61-64% in large classes predominated by first-year students to 50-70% in upper-division engineering courses. The percentages of students who identified as ND (yes) ranged from 14-23% in the large FY courses to 16-39% in the upper

division courses. There were also large percentages of students in the FY courses who indicated that they were maybe ND (14-22%). Potential reasons that many FY students self-identified as maybe ND could be due to less familiarity with the terminology or perhaps they are in the process of undergoing formal diagnosis.

Table 1 – Prevalence of ND Engineering Students.

Semester	Student ranks / majors*	n	% Yes ND	% Maybe ND	% No ND
Spring 2023 [^]	FY, various Eng / pre-Eng	189	18	19	63
Fall 2023	Junior, Env-Eng	37	16	14	70
Fall 2023	Senior, Env-Eng	23	35	9	57
Fall 2023	FY, pre-Eng	116 ⁺	23	16	61
Fall 2023 [^]	FY, various Eng	335	14	22	64
Spring 2024	Jr/Sr, various Eng	28	39	11	50
Spring 2024	FY, various Eng / pre-Eng	328	19	20	61
Total		1,056	18	19	62

[^] Bielefeldt 2024; ⁺ prefer not to respond was removed (5%); * Env-Eng: environmental engineering major, various Eng: various engineering majors, pre-Eng: pre-engineering.

RQ2. Types of Neurodivergence among Engineering Students

Only the upper-level courses included the option for students to self-identify types of ND. The write-in responses are shown in Table 2. Engineering students in upper division courses most commonly identified ADHD and anxiety as their type of neurodivergence. Some individual students listed 1 to 4 different types of neurodivergence. Participants often included qualifiers such as “mild” (associated with depression and ADHD), possible, and “undiagnosed.” There were 43% of the ND students among the seniors in Fall 2023 and the Spring 2024 survey respondents who left the open response blank.

Table 2 - Types of ND Engineering Students Revealed in the Survey Results.

Semester / Major, ranks	Type of Neurodivergence	
	ND Yes (n)	ND Maybe (n)
Fall 2023 / Env-Eng, juniors	ADHD (3), Anxiety (3), PTSD (2), ASD	ADHD (4), Anxiety (4), mild depression
Fall 2023 / Env-Eng, seniors	ADHD (2), Anxiety (2)	Might ADHD (1), Anxiety (1)
Spring 2024 / various Eng majors, juniors & seniors	ADHD (5); ASD, Dyslexia, MDD, GAD ¹ , anxiety, PDD ² , PTSD ³ , BP ⁴	possible ADHD, Anxiety

¹ generalized anxiety, ² persistent depressive disorder, ³ post-traumatic stress disorder, ⁴ bipolar.

RQ3. Gender and ND among Engineering Students

The percentage of students identifying as ND among female, male, and ‘prefer to self-identify’ sex/gender groups are shown in Table 3. Among the students who self-identified a gender, the write-in responses included non-binary, genderfluid, genderqueer, transfem, and two-spirit. The responses among the FY courses and junior/senior courses have been pooled. Among the FY

students, a higher percentage of female than male students identified as ND or maybe ND compared to not ND ($p = 0.0006$). Among the junior/senior engineering students a higher percentage of females compared to male students identified as ND or maybe ND ($p = 0.0416$). High percentages of students who did not select female or male also identified as ND (due to low n statistical tests were not conducted).

Table 3 – Percentage of ND, maybe ND, and neurotypical students among students of different sex/gender identities.

Sex / Gender Identity	N FY/Jr-Sr	FY various engineering (Sp23/F23/Sp24)			Jr-Sr various engineering (F23 / Sp24)		
		ND	Maybe ND	NT	ND	Maybe ND	NT
Female	253 / 44	21	26	53	32	16	52
Male	692 / 41	16	18	66	17	7	76
Self-identify	6 / 3	50	17	33	100	0	0

RQ4. Race and Ethnicity of ND Engineering Students

The percentage of ND, maybe ND, and NT students self-identified among students of different races/ethnicities are summarized in Table 4. Note that students could select multiple racial/ethnic identity categories. For this paper, a grouping of underrepresented minority (URM) was created that included students who identified as African American / Black, Hispanic / Latinx, American Indian or Alaskan Native, and/or Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. At the University of Colorado Boulder and among the survey respondents, URM was predominated by Hispanic/Latinx students. Among the FY students, the percentage of ND, maybe ND, and NT students was similar among White, URM, and Hispanic/Latinx students. Higher percentages of Asian and African American / Black FY students identified as neurotypical (not ND 76% and 71%, respectively). Among junior/senior students, differences among racial/ethnic groups were not significant.

Table 4 – Percentage of ND, maybe ND, and neurotypical students among students self-identifying with different race/ethnicity groups.

Race / Ethnicity	N FY/Jr-Sr	FY various engineering (F23/Sp24)			Jr-Sr, various engineering (F23 / Sp24)		
		ND	Maybe ND	NT	ND	Maybe ND	NT
White	600 / 74	20	21	59	30	14	57
URM	131 / 17	20	20	60	18	12	71
Hispanic / Latinx	90 / 14	21	20	59	21	7	71
African American / Black	21 / NR	14	14	71	NR	NR	NR
Asian	82 / 12	10	15	76*	25	8	67

* Fisher's exact test $p < 0.05$ for ND plus maybe ND and NT as compared to White students

The spring 2023 post-survey for FY students did not ask students to identify their race/ethnicity. Due to low n , other race/ethnicity category choices from the survey are not shown, including American Indian / Native Alaskan, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, Multiracial. NR has been used due to a response number below 5 students.

Limitations

Students may not feel comfortable disclosing neurodivergence in general and/or specific types of ND. This comfort with disclosure might vary based on other demographics such as gender or race/ethnicity. Students may be unfamiliar with the term neurodivergent, unsure whether or not a particular condition is defined as neurodivergent, or be unsure if they have a particular form of neurodivergence (e.g., may not be formally diagnosed). In addition, low numbers pose statistical challenges, particularly for RQ4 looking at race/ethnicity.

Discussion

The percentages of neurodivergent students in engineering are generally within the range that has been reported for college students overall. But these numbers are perhaps higher than many engineering faculty are aware, with 30% to 50% of the students identifying as yes/maybe neurodivergent within individual courses. The fact that there were not appreciably lower percentages of ND students in the upper division courses compared to the FY courses is a positive sign that ND students are not selectively leaving engineering (due to lack of academic success or by choice). The variety of types of neurodivergence among engineering students is also worth noting, as different types of strengths and supports are commonly associated with these conditions.

Fairly large numbers of engineering students self-identified as maybe neurodivergent, which likely reflects a lack of clarity on what conditions “count” as ND (using a medical model), variability in formal diagnosis, and/or lack of general familiarity with the term. The write-in responses reflect this range of framing. Some of the conditions listed are not traditionally considered forms of neurodivergence under a medical model (e.g., anxiety) but are more classically considered mental disorders or internalizing disorders (Andrews et al., 2008). The higher percentage of female compared to male students identifying as ND may reflect this broader framing, females having different ‘markers’ of experience than males (e.g., ADHD), or greater comfort with disclosure.

It is worth noting that over half of the junior/senior level students in the study were female, which is unusual for engineering. Two of the three junior/senior level courses included in the study were predominated by environmental engineering majors; environmental engineering students nationally are about half female (ASEE, 2023). In addition, females typically have higher response rates to surveys than males (Smith, 2008).

Being “multiply exceptional” to the norm of neurotypical males may have particular impacts on female and non-binary students; this warrants further study. Multiply exceptional also applies to neurodivergent students from minoritized racial/ethnic groups. The underdiagnosis rates and manifestation differences for ADHD and other neurodivergent conditions that are suspected for females and some minority groups may exacerbate these effects (e.g., Diemer et al. 2022; Fedele et al. 2012). For example, without a formal diagnosis, students with ADHD or anxiety are not eligible to be prescribed medication that may alleviate some of the symptoms/effects and may not seek out psychological counseling or other psychosocial support (Asherson et al., 2012; Hamed et al. 2015). Thus, attention to intersectional demographics is important.

Conclusions

The study investigated the self-identification rates of neurodivergence among engineering students. Significant percentages of the students identified as neurodivergent and maybe neurodivergent, with 50% to 70% of the engineering students in particular courses identifying as neurotypical (not ND). The most common forms of ND among the junior and senior engineering students were ADHD and anxiety, with a small number identifying ASD, PTSD, depression, and bipolar. The write-in responses lend power to the notion of self-diagnosis and identification, with some conditions not fitting the standard medical definition of neurodivergence. A higher percentage of female than male students identified as neurodivergent. Large differences in ND prevalence among students identifying with different racial/ethnic groups were not found, but the low percentage of non-whites in the study limits the statistical power to identify differences. The research setting at a predominantly white institution (PWI) likely contributed to the small number of responses from non-white students. Intersectional issues of neurodivergence with race /ethnicity warrant further study. This might be best approached using qualitative studies.

Overall, we hope that engineering faculty gain awareness about the prevalence of neurodivergence among their students. Observationally, a higher percentage of students identified as neurodivergent on the survey as compared to the percentage of students receiving academic accommodations. Neurodivergent students, who may have conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, or other neurological differences, frequently encounter difficulties related to their well-being and academic self-confidence, which are often more pronounced than those experienced by neurotypical students (Jarvis and Nordmann, 2022). As awareness of these challenges grows, so does the recognition of the need for increased support and accommodation within educational settings. Faculty members play a crucial role in this regard, as they can proactively design their courses to be more inclusive and accessible to students with diverse learning needs. This proactive approach involves considering various aspects of course design, such as adapting teaching styles to be more flexible, providing alternative assignment options, diversifying assessment methods, and reevaluating grading criteria. By implementing these strategies, faculty members can create a more supportive learning environment that fosters the academic success and overall well-being of neurodivergent students.

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