

FALL 2023

ILLINOIS VALLEY
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

CENTER FOR ACCESSIBILITY &
NEURODIVERSITY

SPOTLIGHT

N E U R O
D i V E R S i T Y

brains develop or work differently
for some reason, and that's normal

N E U R O
D I V E R S E

business entrepreneur ♦ community activist ♦ tutor
gamer ♦ analytical ♦ outside-the-box thinker
good with numbers ♦ deep-dive researcher
long distance runner ♦ soccer player
resilient



Aaron Noble, Alexia Gross, Sonja Penney and other members of the neurodiversity group greeted passing students from a table on Spirit Day.

Making room for Minds of All Kinds

There are many faces to neurodiversity. Those faces might belong to classmates, teammates, siblings—maybe even to you.

What does neurodiversity look like?

“Some people struggle to communicate verbally or in writing but do advanced math beyond the scope of most of us. Sometimes neurodiversity looks like that,” said Tina Hardy, coordinator of the Center for Accessibility & Neurodiversity.

She continued, “Some people can’t pay attention to boring things but their brains are suited to making decisions, acting quickly and looking at details. Or some people might be creative or artistic but struggle with math or reading or organizing their thoughts. Sometimes neurodiversity looks like that, too.”

At IVCC, neurodiversity looks like Minds of All Kinds (MOAK), an organization that emerged last fall under Hardy’s guidance. She conceived it as “a place to be you, and to tell others about you.” Similar social/support organizations have sprouted on college campuses for a population that is often under-represented and underserved.

MOAK has been visible at campus activities, and Hardy hopes it becomes a leading advocate and an eye-opener for campus and community on

equity and diversity issues.

Students stopping by the group’s information table collected brain-shaped fidget gadgets and textured calming strips and seemed to want to learn more. From her side of the table, Alexia Gross was happy to respond.

“It’s good for people to realize people aren’t less intelligent or cop-outs because they struggle with certain things. I used to feel dumb because of that,” she said.

She’s not surprised that gadgets and aids appealed. “The sensory stuff works” anywhere.

Nearly everybody wanted to know what neurodiversity meant. The term acknowledges that brains develop differently, in some cases due to medical disorders, learning disabilities or other conditions.

The concept challenges labels that leave people feeling “less than,” or broken, who “get overlooked, sometimes, in conversations” about affects them, Hardy said. “All brains are good brains, with a broad range of skills and abilities that can be valued and used. Expectations and environments might be the problem, not the brain or the person.”

“We want to be treated as equals and for our opinions to be recognized,” said founding member

Aaron Noble. He wants neurodivergent and neurotypical people to feel comfortable with each other and the concept. “The group has given me hope that I can make a positive difference in the world. I want to create events where we can talk about mental health and how to make it better for each of us.”

“Neurodiversity is not a disease,” says member Laura Pool. “We just think and process differently but we’re still people. It’s the way our brains work.” She anticipates MOAK will give her and other members a foundation to “go on beyond college and help people.”

“People with different abilities have built resilience, and that’s a big skill not everyone has,” said Sonja Penney, whose experience with a neurodiversity group in Florida, that she shared with Hardy, inspired the IVCC group.

She hopes students realize that, with MOAK, “they have somewhere to belong if they want to, where they can find support in ways they need to do better in school. And it’s important to me to know that faculty at the school I attend want to support students, to actually create that support.”

Unlike some physical differences, neurodiversity isn’t always apparent. But differences stemming from dyslexia, ADHD, autism, anxiety and other conditions can create or intensify challenges by elevating anxiety, or making it a strain to focus and do their best, or adapting to changes, or making friends. Strategies, accommodations, or an adjustment to environment can help.

Hardy sees MOAK as a way to build connections with each other and with the college. “They have a chance to participate in events and activities, where they never felt they could before. They see that they can make contributions and be an important part of a community that has respect for them and a place for them. And that’s a big deal.”

MOAK “has benefited me tremendously. I found my best friend there,” Noble said.

Gross said, “It’s just really nice to feel like you can say anything and not have to dumb it down to people who don’t

understand. I feel like where I live, neurodiversity doesn’t get talked about. I haven’t had a connection like this before. We look out for each other.”

Penney, no stranger to self-advocacy, wants to be a role model of that to others. She also believes her growing understanding in her own struggle makes her a better tutor to other students in the Tutoring & Writing Center.

Raul Campos joined to make and meet friends. Diversity is not only the group’s core, but its strength, he believes. “One person’s good at this, another at that, and another at another thing, so we come together and are good at different things, not just one.”

Hardy says the group’s coming together now is right in a lot of ways: “the right students, the right time at the college, the right time in society.”



Clockwise from left: Center for Accessibility Coordinator Tina Hardy, Alexia Gross, Laura Pool and Aaron Noble

It’s important to me that the school I attend wants to support, and actually creates that support for, students.

--- Sonja Penney

What does your brain do well?

Raul Campos

I'm good with numbers. I went all the way through high school and I'm working on college classes. I run my own business. I'm good at New Super Mario Brothers and Sports Nintendo. I played soccer for four years.

Aaron Noble

I'm very good at remembering facts and making logical deductions, collecting information and understanding what it all means. I can take concepts that I understand and explain them at a basic level to someone who is just getting introduced to the subject. I know what worked to help me learn, and I can show others that process. I love my tutoring job (with Tutoring and Writing Center). I'm a strong and avid runner. And I get very good grades in every area.

Laura Pool

I like animals and I'm good at biology. I'm good at puzzle-solving and sorting things. We're able to see things in a different light, to think outside the box and not come up with just a normal solution. We find different ways to do things.

Sonja Penney

After a massive amount of childhood adversity, I'm constantly growing and learning! When you grow up with a different thinking process, internally you figure things out and end up being resilient. That's a big skill not everyone has. I've had to advocate for myself, and others who haven't gone through that struggle can see that side of me and know, if I can ask, it's OK for them to ask, too.

Alexia Gross

I'm a curious person, and very good at research. My biggest strength is just being able to deep-dive into topics. Eight months ago, I became involved in Reimagine Mendota, a community development group. I work on improving the city's web site, gathering data, helping with the Farmers Market – a little bit of everything. It felt weird at first to put my thoughts out to adults – did my voice really matter? A few years ago, I was doing so bad in high school, but now I'm a member of Phi Theta Kappa (honor society). And I'm looking forward next spring to taking in-person classes here for the first time rather than online!

Below left: Rolando Gonzalez and Laura Pool staff the Spirit Day table. Below: Passing students supply answers at an Explore IVCC display.



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--- Tina Hardy