

Exploring Faculty Reactions to Student-Generated Recommendations for Creating Inclusive Classrooms for Students with Non-Apparent Disabilities

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Abstract

The purpose of this practice paper is to examine how engineering instructors can better support students with non-apparent disabilities (NADs) through inclusive, equity-oriented classroom practices. Students with NADs such as chronic illness, emotional disabilities, and cognitive differences, encounter complex, often invisible challenges that shape their learning experiences in engineering programs. Drawing on a qualitative study involving 14 undergraduate engineering students with NADs, this paper centers a detailed analysis of six students' narratives to illuminate the classroom conditions they identified as most supportive. By foregrounding student voice and lived experience, the paper offers actionable, justice-aligned recommendations that instructors can integrate into everyday teaching to foster more accessible and inclusive learning environments.

Five key themes emerged from student narratives: (1) the importance of instructor approachability, especially early in the semester; (2) the value of clear expectations and consistent organization, with structured syllabi and transparent communication reducing cognitive load and anxiety; (3) the need to frame accommodations as matters of equity rather than advantage, with proactive support signaling trust and inclusion; (4) the significance of supportive classroom environments, where relational bonds and empathy foster a sense of belonging; and (5) the necessity of flexibility and understanding, as rigid policies can force unwanted disclosure and discourage students from seeking support.

Faculty responses to these student-driven recommendations revealed both alignment and tension. While instructors generally affirmed the value of approachability, organization, and supportive environments, they also cited structural barriers such as workload, departmental requirements, and logistical challenges around accommodations. These findings underscore the need for institutional frameworks and professional development to help faculty operationalize inclusive practices within the constraints of engineering curricula.

Rather than positioning disability as a deficit, this work centers student agency and calls for pedagogical practices rooted in empathy, transparency, and trust. This paper offers concrete strategies for instructors and highlights the importance of institutional support in fostering equity for students with NADs. The session will be interactive, inviting participants to reflect on their own classroom practices and co-create strategies for more inclusive engineering education.

Introduction

In engineering classrooms, students with non-apparent disabilities (NADs) often encounter complex and invisible challenges that shape their educational experiences in profound ways. NADs, such as chronic illness, emotional disabilities, or cognitive differences, can be overlooked, leaving students to navigate barriers without recognition or support [1], [2], [3], [4]. These challenges manifest in subtle but significant ways, from managing fluctuating health

conditions to balancing cognitive load under rigid classroom structures. Obstacles like these can reinforce exclusion and perpetuate inequities in engineering education.

This practice paper situates these experiences within the EQUITY division's theme, "The classroom as a terrain of struggle and site of possibility." Engineering classrooms are not neutral spaces; they are shaped by pedagogical choices that can either exacerbate struggles or open possibilities for inclusion [3]. For students with NADs, the classroom often becomes a site of negotiation where they must choose between disclosure and privacy, while simultaneously navigating how policies and assumptions about their agency shape their experiences. Understanding these dynamics is essential for creating environments where all students can thrive.

Drawing on a qualitative study of 14 undergraduate engineering students with NADs, this paper amplifies student voices to generate pedagogical practice recommendations that foster equity and belonging. Recommendations were developed using a thematic analysis of the first 6 participants. Rather than framing disability as a limitation, the study centers student-driven recommendations that emphasize empathy, transparency, and trust [5]. Faculty responses to these recommendations are also examined, illustrating how everyday choices can transform classrooms into spaces of possibility or exacerbate struggles. The paper offers concrete strategies for instructors committed to building inclusive learning environments that honor the diverse realities of engineering students.

Background

Accessibility and inclusion for students with non-apparent disabilities (NADs) have become increasingly important topics in higher education. Still, engineering education research has only begun to address these issues in depth. NADs include a wide range of conditions like chronic illness, mental health challenges, and cognitive differences, that are not immediately visible to instructors or peers [3], [6], [7]. Because these disabilities are often invisible, students may encounter barriers without recognition or support, leading to inequities in participation and achievement. In engineering classrooms, these barriers are compounded by rigid course structures, high-stakes assessments, and limited policy flexibility, which can make it difficult for students to manage fluctuating health conditions or cognitive load [8], [9]. These challenges are not merely logistical; they shape students' sense of belonging and agency within the learning environment [5], [7], [8], [10].

Prior research on disability in higher education emphasizes the importance of inclusive pedagogies; however, much of the existing work focuses on visible disabilities or formal accommodation processes rather than the everyday classroom practices that influence inclusion for students with NADs [11], [12], [13]. Engineering education literature has historically prioritized technical rigor and standardized assessment, leaving limited space for discussions of accessibility and equity. As a result, students with NADs often face a dilemma: disclose their disability and risk stigma or remain silent and struggle without support [1], [14]. This tension underscores the need for proactive strategies that do not rely solely on disclosure.

Frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) offer promising avenues for expanding accessibility, even without student disclosure, through everyday instructional choices. UDL advocates for designing courses that

anticipate learner variability by providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression [15], [16]. This proactive approach shifts the focus from retrofitting accommodations to embedding flexibility into the course design itself. Similarly, TILT emphasizes clarity and transparency in assignments and expectations, reducing ambiguity that can disproportionately affect students with NADs [17]. For example, clearly articulating the purpose, task, and criteria for assignments can help students manage cognitive load and anxiety. While these frameworks provide conceptual guidance, their application in engineering contexts remains limited. Faculty often lack concrete, discipline-specific strategies to operationalize these principles within the constraints of technical curricula and accreditation requirements [18].

Despite growing awareness, significant gaps persist in the literature. Existing studies tend to emphasize institutional compliance or legal obligations rather than the relational and pedagogical dimensions of inclusion [1], [12], [19]. Few investigations center on the voices of students with NADs to identify classroom practices that they find most supportive. This absence of actionable guidance leaves instructors uncertain about how to translate inclusive principles into everyday teaching decisions [20]. Addressing this gap is critical for engineering educators committed to equity, as pedagogical choices can either reinforce exclusion or foster belonging.

This paper responds to these gaps by amplifying the perspectives of 6 undergraduate engineering students with NADs. Through qualitative analysis, it highlights classroom practices that students identified as supportive and explores how these practices align with broader frameworks such as UDL and TILT. By centering student agency and offering concrete strategies, this work aims to transform engineering classrooms from terrains of struggle into sites of possibility.

Methods

This paper builds on a prior qualitative study that explored the classroom experiences of engineering students with non-apparent disabilities (NADs). In that study, we conducted 90-minute semi-structured interviews with 14 undergraduate engineering students who self-identified as having a NAD, such as chronic illness, emotional disabilities, or cognitive differences. No formal documentation was required for participation. Interview questions focused on three areas: challenges students faced in engineering classrooms, classroom elements associated with those challenges, and instructor strategies perceived as supportive. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis approach. Researchers first created structured summaries of each interview and then identified themes related to the research questions [21], [22]. Sentiment coding was used for classroom elements to capture positive and negative associations. Participants reviewed the summary of recommendations as part of our member-checking process to ensure the accuracy of our interpretations.

Building on these findings, we summarized student recommendations into a set of actionable strategies for instructors. These strategies emphasized relational openness, clarity and organization, equitable accommodations, supportive classroom environments, and flexibility. The original student feedback was condensed into five key recommendations, which served as the basis for the next phase of this work. The five themes are: (1) prioritizing approachability, (2) providing clear expectations and organization, (3) understanding accommodations as equitable, (4) fostering a supportive environment, and (5) showing flexibility and understanding. Alongside

each recommendation, we provided additional context and student quotes from the interviews to support our recommendations.

To examine faculty perspectives on these student-driven recommendations, we solicited feedback from five engineering professors. Each professor reviewed the summarized recommendations and provided written responses regarding feasibility, perceived impact, and potential challenges. We analyzed these responses using thematic analysis, focusing on tone and content to identify common threads across participants [21]. Themes were developed inductively, capturing areas of alignment with student recommendations as well as points of tension or concern. This paper presents a synthesis of these faculty perspectives, highlighting convergent and divergent views and discussing implications for inclusive teaching practices in engineering education.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of student interviews revealed five interconnected recommendations to improve students' experiences with NADs in engineering. The discussion of these findings highlights both the promise of these strategies and the structural barriers that shape their implementation.

Prioritize Approachability Early On

Students consistently emphasized the importance of instructors who are approachable and respectful, describing how relational openness reduces anxiety and increases their willingness to seek help or disclose access needs. These relational dynamics were especially meaningful for students who had previously encountered stigma around their disability. One student summarized:

If you're trying to make your classroom more accessible, the first step is being approachable and respectful of your students. Because they're not going to ask you for accommodations or try to even use their accommodations if talking to you is a chore.

Faculty generally affirmed the value of approachability, yet several noted that they lacked concrete examples of what this looks like in practice and expressed uncertainty about how to balance openness with professional boundaries. This tension suggests that while relational teaching aligns with inclusive pedagogical goals, faculty may benefit from more explicit guidance and institutional support to confidently enact these practices [13], [23].

Provide Clear Expectations and Organization

Students also stressed the need for clear expectations and organized course structures, noting that predictable schedules, transparent grading criteria, and well-structured syllabi reduce cognitive load and help them plan effectively. A clear schedule allows them to manage their time effectively to accommodate flare-ups or other difficulties that may arise from their NAD. For many students with NADs, clarity minimizes ambiguity that can otherwise become a barrier to learning.

We had homework due every Thursday and Sunday, and then either a quiz or a written homework every Monday [...] I love the organization of that class like that. [...] like, when the class is actually organized from the get go and you can at least try to better

prepare your mind to like, have things due that day instead of a teacher just being like, 'Oh, by the way, like next class we have a like 20 problem homework assignment.'

Faculty agreed that organization is beneficial but described their own challenges related to semester planning, shifting departmental requirements, and unpredictable research or service demands, which many admitted impacting their ability to prepare courses ahead of time or maintain as high a standard of organization as they would like. This is aligned with prior research showing that faculty are often expected to juggle service, research and teaching responsibilities. Difficulty balancing these aspects may leave less time than desired to organize the coursework ahead of time [24], [25]. These constraints highlight a structural mismatch between students' needs for predictability and the realities of academic workload, suggesting that institutional processes can shape the feasibility of course design that fully meets students' needs.

Understanding Accommodations as Equitable, not Advantageous

A third theme centered on equitable accommodations. Students expressed strong appreciation for instructors who proactively communicate about accommodations and normalize flexibility for all learners, not only those with formal documentation. One student described a particularly supportive professor who went out of their way to accommodate students who did not have official paperwork/documentation with the college:

I think he said, 'even if you don't have accommodations, I will accommodate you.'

This proactive stance reduced the burden of self-advocacy for students with NADs, and signaled respect. However, some students expressed that some professors were skeptical about accommodating their needs:

[Professors] wanna make sure that kids aren't cheating, y'know? And then they look at accommodations as a way for kids to get ahead, pull one over on them... You gotta treat students like they're not lying to you right from the get-go.

Faculty responses reflected both support and concern related to this recommendation, confirming students' split experiences with professors' stances on accommodations. Many of the faculty in the group who gave us feedback recognized the value of proactive accommodations. Still, some questioned how to maintain fairness across large classes or manage the additional workload associated with individualized flexibility. For example, professors struggled with when to provide worked solutions to open-ended problems with students who needed different due dates on assignments. Current research in this area shows a similar trend where faculty want to balance support and fairness for their classes [26]. These concerns point to the need for clearer institutional frameworks that help faculty implement accommodations easily and equitably, without relying as heavily on personal discretion or implementation.

Foster a Supportive Environment

Students also emphasized the importance of supportive classroom environments that foster connection, shared experiences, and a sense of belonging. They described how empathy, validation, and relational bonds with instructors and peers helped them persist through challenging coursework. One student mentioned signing up for another class taught by a particular professor because they felt they bonded over neurodiversity.

Her children had neurodivergence and I think she was like a 'neurodivergence mom', where she was like, 'they probably got it from me, they started getting these diagnoses for a bunch of things that I see in myself.' She was one of my most supportive professors.

Faculty generally agreed on the importance of this recommendation, but those who identified as having a NAD themselves strongly affirmed the value of these strategies and noted that their own experiences helped them recognize subtle barriers that might otherwise go unnoticed. Their insights underscore the importance of representation and lived experience in shaping inclusive pedagogical practices. It also suggests a need for professional development that provides concrete, actionable strategies for supporting students whose experiences differ from those of their instructors [27].

Show Flexibility and Understanding

Finally, students highlighted the need for flexibility around deadlines, exams, and participation. They framed flexibility not as a reduction in rigor but as a means of equitably accessing learning. For example, students talked about the importance of flexibility when executive functioning challenges, chronic illness flare-ups, or sensory overload interfered with rigid timelines. One student describes how a strict syllabus policy made them unlikely to use their accommodations.

Because [professor] had a 'no late work' policy, I didn't even really try.

Testing accommodations were another area that posed a particularly difficult challenge for some students.

[Professor] inadvertently made me feel a little bit bad about asking [to take an exam at the testing center]. I tried to schedule a test in the testing center, and he just kept telling me to just take the test in the engineering building instead, because it was easier for him.

Faculty acknowledged the importance of flexibility but noted logistical barriers as a major hindrance for implementing this approach, particularly regarding exam accommodations and testing center limitations. One professor said that sometimes engineering exams need clarification from the professor on certain questions, and that students who use the testing center may miss additional context that would help their understanding. Misconceptions and gaps in knowledge about offices of disability services and the provision of accommodations could negatively impact students, but prior research has shown that faculty are strongly interested in professional development opportunities to improve their classrooms for students with disabilities [28]. These challenges reveal systemic constraints that extend beyond individual classrooms and suggest that meaningful flexibility requires coordinated institutional support.

Conclusions

While the recommendations from the students in our study are critical for amplifying the lived experiences of students with NADs when developing supportive classroom practices, instructors can also draw on principles from Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) to operationalize the practices students described. UDL encourages faculty to anticipate learner variability by offering multiple ways for students to engage with material, demonstrate their understanding, and manage cognitive load. These strategies directly address the fluctuating capacities and access needs, which were common issues that students with NADs articulated in our study. For example, providing varied

participation formats like written or oral reports with a selection of topics can reduce barriers. Another way to make classrooms more accessible without compromising rigor is to break complex tasks into smaller components.

TILT complements these efforts by emphasizing clarity in purpose, task, and evaluation criteria. Transparent assignment design helps students understand expectations upfront, reducing ambiguity and the executive functioning demands that often exacerbate disability-related challenges. Together, UDL and TILT offer practical, scalable frameworks that align with student recommendations and support instructors in creating predictable, flexible, and equitable learning environments within the constraints of engineering curricula [15], [17].

These findings align closely with the EQUITY Division's emphasis on inclusive, student-centered engineering education. Approachable faculty, transparent expectations, proactive accommodations, supportive environments, and flexible structures all help reduce systemic barriers for marginalized learners. At the same time, the faculty perspectives we solicited on the recommendations we generated highlight the structural and institutional challenges that complicate implementation. These results suggest several implications for practice, including the use of transparent assignment design frameworks such as TILT, proactive communication about expectations and accommodations, predictable course structures even when full semester planning is complex, and stronger collaboration with disability services to streamline processes. Ultimately, the findings underscore the central role of empathy, transparency, and trust in engineering education and point to the need for institutional changes that support faculty in adopting inclusive practices sustainably.

This study highlights how everyday pedagogical choices shape engineering students' experiences with NADs and demonstrates that inclusive teaching is both relational and structural. Students emphasized the importance of approachability, clarity, equitable accommodations, supportive environments, and flexibility. These practices collectively reduce barriers and foster a sense of belonging. Faculty responses revealed strong alignment with these values but also underscored the institutional constraints that complicate implementation, including workload demands, limited guidance, and logistical challenges around accommodations. These findings reinforce the EQUITY Division's framing of the classroom as both a terrain of struggle and a site of possibility. While students continue to navigate invisible barriers, instructors have meaningful opportunities to transform their classrooms through intentional, transparent, and empathetic practices.

By centering student voices and examining faculty perspectives, this work offers insight to help engineering educators create more accessible and equitable learning environments. Approaches such as transparent assignment design, proactive communication, and predictable course structures can be implemented within existing curricula. In contrast, broader institutional changes, such as streamlined accommodation processes and more precise guidance for faculty, are needed to sustain these efforts. Ultimately, fostering inclusion for students with NADs requires a shared commitment to empathy, transparency, and trust. Instructors and institutions need to work together to honor the diverse realities of their students.

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