**Liz Norell Interview**

**Learn how to support neurodivergent students.**

**AS** [00:00:47] For today's podcast, it's a pleasure to have Dr. Liz Norell. Liz serves as Associate Director of Instructional Support in the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at the University of Mississippi. She has spent more than 20 years in teaching in higher education, including stints in composition, journalism, new media and political science. She completed a Ph.D. in political science at the University of Texas Dallas, along with a master's degree in journalism from the University of Arkansas and Library Science from Texas Women's University. Liz's first book, The Present Professor, is under advanced contract from the University of Oklahoma Press's brand new series: teaching, engaging and thriving in higher ed, co-edited by James Lange and Michelle Miller, and is expected to be published in 2024. The book is aimed at educators who know they want to create meaningful relationships with students but aren't quite sure how to do that in an authentic way. Liz is passionate about equitable, inclusive teaching, constructive conversations across differences and fostering meaningful learning. She was diagnosed with anxiety in 2016 and autism in 2023. In addition to her work with faculty to boost awareness of disability, especially hidden disability in academia, she's working with a group of disabled in higher ed appears on an edited collection of narrative essays about the intersection of disability and education. Welcome to the Student Success Podcast, Liz.

**Liz Norell** [00:02:19] I am really excited to be with you out.

**AS** [00:02:21] So I'd like to start all podcast with guests if they wouldn't mind sharing a story or hobby or anything like that. Would you share something?

**Liz Norell** [00:02:32] Absolutely. I've been going back and forth on what I wanted to share with you, but I think I'm going to tell you a story that will tell you a little bit about me. So earlier this year, I was at a annual breakfast for a women's leadership organization that I belonged to in Chattanooga. And it just so happened that the people they were doing an installation of new board members and they had forgotten to bring their gavel to the event. And so they were trying to figure out what they were going to do. And by absolute sheer coincidence, I happened to have a gavel in my car because years ago I used to run these very big congressional simulations with my students who were taking an introductory American government class. And so I had a whole box of gavels that I bought for them to use and like these mock committee meetings. And I just happened to be bringing one to the SGA president that day to have. So I went out to my car and got the gavel and brought it in. And they were like, only you, Liz, would have a gavel on short notice. And I will tell you, I'll actually I have that gavel here at my desk right now. So, yes, that's me.

**AS** [00:03:49] That's cool story. Thanks for sharing that. You shared something on social media that immediately grabbed my attention and I reached out and I said would love to unpack this with you because you shared a piece that you wrote: what instructors need to know when working with neurodivergent students. I was wondering if we can go to the basics here and could you unpack what neurodivergent means before we discuss some of those strategies that you have, some of the tangible steps to support neurodivergent students?

**Liz Norell** [00:04:26] Absolutely. And I'm really glad for this space to talk about this, because I know a lot of people have heard this word and it gets used in interesting ways. So sometimes we hear about neurodiversity versus neurodivergent, and that's the first really key distinction I want to make, because neurodiversity, like any kind of diversity, happens when you have more than two people together, more than one person, I guess. When you get to people, you have neurodiversity. And so every group of students is going to be neurodiverse because every brain works a little bit differently. Neurodivergent means that somebody's brain processes information in a way that is not typical or what we would call neurotypical. So conditions that get lumped under the umbrella of neurodivergent include things like autism, ADHD, dyslexia. There are a whole bunch of other dyspraxia and those sorts of things. Sometimes people will include obsessive compulsive disorder to tourettes or bipolar disorder under the umbrella of neurodivergent. But the point is, someone with a neurodivergent brain thinks in ways that are different from what the average sort of quote unquote normal person would experience making sense of the world.

**AS** [00:05:47] Thank you. Yeah, that's foundational. Thank you for clearing that up. And then you also explain in the piece some of the different forms, you talk a little bit about autism and ADHD, etc.. Can you give us a little bit basic information about those as well?

**Liz Norell** [00:06:02] Absolutely. So I'll start with ADHD, because I think that's probably the one that's been around, at least for all of my life. My brother was diagnosed with ADHD, although it was just called ADHD back then when he was maybe four or five years old. And looking back now, I'm not even totally sure that he had ADD or ADHD. I think he was just a normal boy of about five years old. But ADHD or ADHD, it looks like someone who just has trouble focusing their attention intentionally so people with ADHD can become very hyper focused, but they don't always necessarily get to choose what that hyper focus target is. So something we call executive function, which is the ability to control your, you know, cognition in different ways. Time management, for example, falls under the category of executive function. People with ADHD really have a deficit of that ability to control what their attention is going to that executive functioning. Autism is really just a way of processing information that's different. So autism is a very inclusive category of a lot of different kinds of behaviors and ways of thinking. So we may have the stereotype of what autism looks like, and it's probably a young boy sitting off by himself not making eye contact, maybe making some repetitive movements, sometimes like some flapping might happen and a very strong interest in very specific topics where they become absolute experts. And that is one way that autism can show up. But there are lots of other ways as well, and it's often having to do with how the brain processes information coming in and then how well it can express itself in ways that other people will understand.

**AS** [00:08:04] We don't know how many of our college students are neurodivergent. K-12 districts fight testing and services because it's expensive. Now, if you have social capital, you might have a better shot at navigating the system to get your child and IEP, an individualized educational plan. But so many don't. And many of these students don't want the stigma of using DSPs, disabled student services, when they enroll in college, right?

**Liz Norell** [00:08:38] Absolutely. And thank you for mentioning that. I think you said in my bio I was diagnosed with anxiety in 2016 and autism this year in 2023. I went my entire life like 45 years without even conceiving of the possibility that I might be autistic because it's really under-diagnosed in women, because the social norms around female behavior are so ingrained in us that we become very good at masking and masking is just this process of kind of hiding or trying to assimilate into the behaviors that other people would want you to have. And so I had no idea until a friend of mine said, I know you don't want to hear this, but you're autistic. And I was like, I don't even know why you would say that. And I went through the testing process, but it took me a year from the time I called for the appointment until I got tested and got the results back. And I'm somebody who had pretty good state insurance and the support and the wherewithal to go through that. So you're absolutely right that there are going to be a lot of students who either suspect that they have a condition but haven't gotten a formal diagnosis. And in that case, the student disability services is not going to be able to help them. They have to have documentation. There may also be students who have no idea that they might have some sort of disability or condition that would be benefited with an accommodations plan. And so as faculty that we should assume that the students who do have formal accommodations, first of all, have jumped through so many hoops to get them, and these accommodations are not giving them a leg up. It's giving them a fair shot. And that's something that I think a lot of faculty don't quite understand because they've never been through this process. They just assume that these accommodations are trying to like, cheat the system or game the system in some way. And that is definitely not it. But in terms of what we can do, then we should assume that there are many more students who need the accommodations than those who ask for them. Even students who've registered with disability services may qualify for accommodations that they don't ask for because the stigma around these diagnoses can feel really scary. So as faculty, then what we should do is we should design our courses as though some contingent of our students are going to have these challenges so that we don't need to do anything different to accommodate them. And what are some of those things? So let me get into that just a little bit. One is being aware of the sensory environment of your classroom. So by that I mean, is there like echoing sounds from the hallway? I taught in what I often called the worst classroom on campus for several years at my last employer. And it was so loud. It was the main hallway in a building with no carpeting. And anytime somebody walked by outside talking, we could hear every word they said. So that was challenging for me as an instructor to manage, much less the students in the class. Being aware of that. There may not be anything you can do, but talking to students about how distracting that is can help some of the people who are feeling flooded by that sensory input. Understand that you at least see that and recognize that they may not be able to pay attention very well on noisy days. Are the lights really bright? In the autism community, you often hear people say things like the lights are too loud and it's because the brightness of the lights comes across, it's just like this very jarring, overwhelming sensory input that makes it hard to focus when people are very close together. You can smell them, you can hear every sound they make. I had a student last spring who was very disturbed when she could hear other people chewing, and this was a night class, so people often had food. And so she asked if she could just stay outside the classroom until we started class. And we made a rule as a group. After she said this to me in confidence that, I just said, so that we're not interrupting other people's train of thought, we're going to eat during breaks, but not during class. And that was just a really easy way to help her manage that sensory input. So, you know, thinking about that is really important. The next thing that we can do is just like explicitly say to students, you may have something about you, whether you call that a disability or not, that makes sitting in a classroom for however long. Our class is 50 minutes, 75 minutes, two and a half hours, whatever it might be makes that difficult. So if you need to do something to make this easier for you, we can figure that out with or without an accommodation. So human bodies were not meant to sit still for 90 minutes or 75 minutes or even 50 minutes. And so giving students permission right at the beginning of the semester to stand up and walk around or maybe just step outside the room for 2 minutes and coming back, that can be huge for students who are neurodivergent. And then the other thing that I would say is that very clear multimodal communication is incredibly important. So don't just rely on verbal directions because some of your students may have trouble recalling that later, especially those who are ADHD. And so having everything that's critical to course success in writing and then when reminding them of it can be really helpful. I mentioned that executive function is a real challenge for people who are neurodivergent. Not all and not always, but often. And you know, we often see faculty talking about this like these students have no time management skills. Well, or maybe they just struggle with executive function. And so scaffolding in skills, timelines, structures so that students don't get to a point where this huge thing is due and you've never talked about it or interacted with them about it before. That's setting your neurodivergent students up for failure. So breaking big assignments down into smaller chunks. Scaffolding how to manage your time, giving them examples, being willing to talk to students about how to do that. Don't just assume that they can. Those can be huge supports for all students, including those who are neurodivergent.

**AS** [00:15:01] You have personal experience with neurodivergence. Would you mind sharing your journey? Barriers you experienced and tips you could provide?

**Liz Norell** [00:15:12] Absolutely. And I'm glad you asked about that. No one's ever asked me that before, so thank you. It was when my friend, who is a psychology professor, said, I think you're autistic. I really took that to heart because I trust her to know. And she has a lot of experience with neurodivergent people and may herself be neurodivergent. I don't know. I started googling autism testing near me and found several places. But, you know, ultimately I had to go to my primary care physician and get a referral. So I had to explain to the doctor why I thought I might be autistic and what I hoped to gain from a diagnosis. She's like you're 45. Why do you care? And I'm like, Well, I think it'll help me be a better advocate for myself. But he was like, I don't really see why you would want to do this. So that was the first barrier. And then I got a referral and made an appointment. But they're not used to testing adults. They're used to testing young boys and they're really good at that. But even girls and adult women and if you happen to be an adult woman of color, then there's so little knowledge out there. And so I specifically looked for a place that said they specialized in adult diagnoses. It was about an hour away from where I lived. And thankfully the intake and results appointments were by telehealth, but the testing, I had to drive an hour to go get that. If you have trouble finding a place that can do it or do it in a reasonable timeframe, there are two places I would recommend looking. The first one is your local disability services office probably knows who in town can do that because they work with them all the time to get paperwork. The second one is that whatever kind of neurodivergent you think you might have, there's probably a national, state or local association with resources and educational materials. You may be able to refer you somewhere. And if I'm talking to someone who works in an institution, a faculty or staff member, you may have an employee assistance program, an EAP. They often include concierge services where they can give you a referral and may even be able to make that appointment for you. So I didn't really think of that when I was pursuing my own. But I wish in hindsight that I had because I think I probably could have found somewhere faster.

**AS** [00:17:32] So when it's official through testing. Now, you know for sure. How has a diagnosis impacted you?

**Liz Norell** [00:17:40] I'm going to answer this question in a non standard way, which is to say that not knowing this was the problem. So it's not that knowing it helped me do something better or not. It's that when I didn't know, I could not explain why I was having so much trouble in one particular working environment and set of relationships. So I don't mind sharing here because I've shared elsewhere that the reason I'm at the University of Mississippi now, and I started here in July of 2023, is that I was a faculty member at a community college in Tennessee, and I was denied tenure. And the grounds for the denial of tenure were that I was unprofessional and lacked collegiality. And those were the only reasons that were given. But as I look over the examples that my supervisors used to deny me tenure, it all makes so much more sense to me when I see it through the lens of autism, because what they saw is obstinance or argumentativeness or, you know, just intransigence was me fundamentally not understanding how to meet their expectations and asking over and over again and never understanding the explanation. And so what looked like a long pattern of me just ignoring their directions was me completely struggling to understand how to meet those expectations. And so getting the diagnosis was really important to me because otherwise there was no way I could make sense of that experience. And it has also helped me better understand my own blindspots and to articulate those with the people I work with and have a little bit more humility when I start to get flooded with frustration because I understand that there's just a fundamental communication problem happening. And it's not that someone's trying to be a jerk to me. And hopefully they will understand that I'm not trying to be a jerk to them.

**AS** [00:19:39] I'm so sorry that happened to you. It makes me think of the countless people who experience rejection and other forms of negativity because of such a lack of understanding of this critically important topic we're discussing.

**Liz Norell** [00:19:57] And to be to be fair, Al, I wish that that had not happened. It was very traumatic and very just very unpleasant. But I also don't think that my supervisors who kind of instigated this would have ever imagined that I might be autistic because I didn't. And, you know, I'm a smart and capable woman and communicator, so how could I possibly be autistic? I don't have a problem with eye contact. I have none of the sort of classic signs. But it's not just that everybody expresses it in the same way. And as a woman who's made it to her forties in higher education, like I've learned how to act like people want me to act. And so, you know, I do wish that it hadn't happened. But I also don't think that it was done with intentional malice. I think it was just not knowing. And I wish that I had had the vocabulary then to explain why we were having these constant conflicts.

**AS** [00:20:53] Thank you for sharing that. Now I have a question about online learning. We were forced to transition to online at the height of the pandemic, and there's more online offerings now than ever before. Do you happen to have any recommendations on how to better serve neurodivergent students in an online learning environment?

**Liz Norell** [00:21:17] What a great question. I haven't thought a lot honestly about how to create structures that are specifically designed for neurodivergent students in an online or hybrid setting, but I think that that clarity of communication becomes even more important and scaffolding of assignments becomes even more important when you're not interacting with people in a synchronous fashion regularly. It just becomes absolutely vital to have those structures in place organized and clearly so that you are facilitating student success. In general, I have found that when I am more human with my students and talk about my own failures as well as my own successes, that that creates an environment of trust that enables them to talk to me about things that they might have not otherwise felt safe enough to tell me about. Right. For example, when I talk to my students in the spring after I got the diagnosis and said, you know, I just went through this and I'm learning what this means and I'm learning how this might affect my ability to understand you or for you to understand me, that, you know, that opens the door for other students to come to me and say, Oh yeah, I've had a similar experience with autism or ADHD or dyslexia or whatever in an online environment, those kinds of disclosures, they don't have to be the most vulnerable thing ever. And you don't owe your students your entire story. But if you can find places where it feels safe to you to disclose something a little vulnerable where you've struggled in the past, that can really open the door so much, and then creating easy ways for students to reach out to you. So, I mean, I know that a lot of instructors will not want to do this, but I in the last I mean, since the pandemic, really since 2020, I have just started giving students my cell phone number. And I tell them, like, I will not answer the phone. If you call, you won't answer the phone if I call. But if you want to text me, I will respond to you. And that's often a much lower stakes proposition for students than it is to send an email or going into the LMS and sending a message. You know, if there's something that I can do that will make this class easier for you, just send me a text message and, you know, tell me who you are. And I'm not going to respond at 3 a.m., but, you know, send me a text message and we'll figure it out.

**AS** [00:23:42] I often wonder if there's such a thing as normal. Forgive me if I say it wrong, perhaps most people are somewhere on the spectrum? Do we all have a little something? So centering kindness with our students and colleagues becomes that much more important, right? If we're kind, chances are we'll do so much good to help our neurodivergent students and colleagues. Give people the benefit of the doubt.

**Liz Norell** [00:24:17] I mean, from your mouth to God's ears that we live in a world where everybody just assumes that each person has a unique constellation of experiences and talents and we can meet them where they are. I don't really like the idea that everyone is a little bit on the spectrum, and I think that that's a pretty common way of thinking about it. I don't know, because I'm not. I mean, I'm, what, ten months deep into this. But to me, that feels not as comfortable as saying that everybody has a different way of being and some people have some clear neurodivergences. But everybody is, as I said, a unique constellation of experiences and strengths. And so if we can just remember to keep in mind each other's humanity and the fact that every experience and every relationship is going to inform who's showing up in your class each day. And so they are the product of their educational and life experiences. So, yes, everyone is complex, everyone has preferences, and everyone has things that they feel less comfortable sharing or doing around others. And so, hopefully we create an environment where no matter who you are and what diagnosis you have, don't suspect that you have, can show up and be authentic. And you know, you mentioned in my bio the book, the book is not about neurodivergent at all and only barely talks about my own experiences. But the goal of the book is really to help faculty figure out underneath all these layers of educational experience that for many of us felt somewhat traumatic. Your graduate school takes us away from our instincts and our selves and layers on these expectations of who we're supposed to be. The book is designed to help us figure out, who are we at our core, what is authentic for us. Because when we can show up as authentically as it is safe to do so, then that makes it easier for students to do the same. When we are showing up, guarded, and kind of playing the role of very smart professor, then we can't do things like admit to our own failures or be vulnerable or be willing to admit that we're wrong because that tarnishes the veneer of the character we're playing. But if we can get okay with ourselves, then we can be much, much more present to our students. That's been part of my journey in trying to figure out this autism thing is just like, How do I know myself better so that I can be more available for my students?

**AS** [00:26:45] What happens when a faculty notices a pattern of behavior that leads them to hypothesize that a student or a colleague is potentially neurodivergent. How might one talk about this or should they?

**Liz Norell** [00:27:02] We cannot diagnose other people. And the friend who said that to me was a very, very close friend who was one of my mentors and advisers during this ten year situation. I was just so frustrated. And she said, you know, listen, I know you're frustrated. I think this is why and we have a close enough relationship that she could say that. But I would caution against any faculty member trying to diagnose their students, because that's just not your role and that's not your expertise unless you happen to be an expert in autism. I do think that there are ways that we can talk about these things in ways that don't call out a particular person or behavior. And so, you know, I mentioned that I told my students in the spring about my own experiences. If you're not autistic or don't have some sort of neurodivergent situation going on, you can talk about a friend, you can talk about me and just pretend like we're friends, right? So I was listening to my friend Liz the other day and she was talking about how, you know, she experiences the world like this. And that really got me thinking about the different ways that we can try to break down barriers. And so I'm curious if anybody here has thoughts about how we can make things clearer or easier for you, right? So that it's not like, oh, yeah, let me demand information about your life or your diagnosis, but just like, let's have a conversation as a group about what kinds of practices we can all engage in that will help us all be more successful. If you do that, maybe at the second or third class, not the first one, and you've done some work to build a little bit of community in the class, that can be really helpful because now students aren't afraid of speaking up. You can also tell them like, you may not want to say anything in class, but if you want to judge down on a piece of paper or send me a note or leave a note on my door or whatever it might be, some some less obvious way, perhaps anonymous, you could even set up a form that students could submit anonymously just to let them know that you're aware and you're willing to hear that. I think that can be really helpful. But again, I wouldn't ever call out behaviors and highlight them either in a group setting or to a student individually.

**AS** [00:29:12] Right. Right. Of course. As we wrap up, if someone on campus, a faculty for example, would like to create PD for this topic, what would you recommend they do?

**Liz Norell** [00:29:26] Start by going to your disability services office because they probably know the most on your campus. You might also look to local organizations on or providers on this because there's probably someone in your community, you know, maybe not like literally in your town, but nearby who does client service work or coordination of care or informational advocacy work, those sorts of things around neurodivergent. But then if you happen to know anyone on your staff who considers themselves to be neurodivergent, you might ask them if they'd be willing to talk, because I really think it's important to center the voices of people who have these different kinds of ways of being in the world. There's a saying in the community that is nothing for us without us. And I think those those lived experiences are important. And so I'm happy to be doing that. But let me just say that whether you're doing PD on Neurodivergence or just doing PD or hosting class, being aware of these things like the sensory information, the layout of the room, how close people are, you know, if you're offering food, do you have something that's kind of bland and not like I am the worst snooty academic ever because I hate anything that's not just like very bland, normal food. Like, don't take me to a fancy restaurant. That is my worst nightmare. And so I'm really bad at talking about, the latest trendy restaurant. But have those options available for other people.

**AS** [00:31:02] So you run the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. You have such a wealth of knowledge. Any last words of wisdom you could impart?

**Liz Norell** [00:31:13] First of all, I don't run the center. My boss would be very uncomfortable if I represented that.

**AS** [00:31:21] Got it.

**Liz Norell** [00:31:22] I work in the center. Yes. Yes. We have a very talented and capable leader, Josh Eyler, and really just a rock star team here. I feel very fortunate to be here. But, you know, I would say just we can go a long way in higher ed doing something that that you mentioned, which is just giving people the benefit of the doubt, assuming that if someone is being grumpy or persnickety, that there's a reason and it's probably not you and just kind of assuming the best until you have evidence to the contrary takes you really far. Centering the human will take you even farther. So, I like talking about this because I think it's a community that often gets overlooked or that is so stigmatized because of historical misperceptions and myths. But honestly, I think if we all just centered the humanity and gave people the benefit of the doubt in our educational settings, no one would ever need any accommodations because we would already have the structures in place to create a human education system. So that's my parting thought.

**AS** [00:32:27] This was such an illuminating podcast episode. I can't thank you enough for participating in the Students Success podcast, Liz.

**Liz Norell** [00:32:38] It was a great pleasure. Thank you for the very good questions.