



Neurodiversity Career Experience Program (NDCE) Project Playbook

UConn's CNDEI developed the NDCE program as method to connect employers and universities in an innovative alternative to traditional internships - especially for neurodiverse students.

This document describes the recommended process to deploy the NDCE.

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summary of 01
the program.

The Neurodiversity Career Experience (NDCE) program offers a summer employment opportunity to neurodivergent students early in their college careers.

It provides a structured approach to link university partners with employers who desire to improve their inclusion of neurodiverse talent.

**the NDCE
at a glance.**

2023 Pilot Program Participants

This project playbook references the pilot offering of the NDCE program, which included the following partners:

Program Lead

University of Connecticut CNDEI

University Partner

**University of Illinois
Urbana-Champaign**

Employer Partner


Synchrony



UConn's Center for Neurodiversity and Employment Innovation (CNDEI) is committed to exponentially growing the number of employers that offer meaningful career opportunities for bright, neurodivergent individuals nationwide.

One strategy for executing that mission includes designing, developing, and delivering alternative models to existing work experience and career readiness activities at the higher education level, including the Neurodiversity Career Experience Program (NDCE) discussed here.

about the Center.



"I learned so much more than I expected. **I'm really happy the company did this with us.**"

Student Participant

the need.

Universities told us:

Our ND students need innovative opportunities with employers that give them work experience where their skills are *right now*.

And employers said:

We'd like to meet ND students earlier in their college journey to get to know them, build relationships, and develop talent.

Career development activities in college are essentially designed for neurotypical (NT) students following a neurotypical trajectory. This could include securing 1-2 internships along the way, participating in clubs, holding leadership roles, and taking a rigorous schedule of academics... in other words, do what it takes to present oneself as a job candidate as competitively packaged as possible for employers.

Unfortunately, this career development process simply does not work as well for many neurodivergent college students (including those with autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and other learning differences). These students' cognitive differences all too often create barriers to success during their education and employment journeys. ND students often arrive at their full-time job search at a disadvantage, and their job applications and resumes show it.

The Neurodiversity Career Experience Program (NDCE) model was created to offer ND students an alternative opportunity for career development and workplace readiness that does not currently exist in most higher-ed environments. It supplements a traditional internship, co-op, or summer job model with a learning experience model – a model that serves both the employer and the student.

A Neurodiversity training & education for employer participants.

Employer participants receive neurodiversity training and instruction from UConn CNDEI prior to meeting with students. Topics that are addressed include:

- What does neurodiversity even mean?
- What are the distinctions between different neurodiverse labels? And what do I need to know?
- How might neurodivergence show up in the workplace?
- What are strategies and skills will help me be successful with ND students?

B Employee mentors provide 1:1 guidance for student career paths.

Employer volunteer mentors meet weekly with student mentees to identify next steps in their career development and plan for the upcoming academic year. Mentees also learn about workplace skills like email communication, virtual meetings, interviewing, networking and resume writing.

C Employee Track Leaders answer students' (real) job questions.

Employer volunteer Track Leaders host discussion sessions for students to explore different parts of the partner business - career "tracks" the students could choose to pursue. Each session exposes students to an area of the business and connects the types of skills, interests, and daily demands for each of these jobs within the track. This exposure gives students an early, realistic perspective of future job options and duties, and employers get to know ND students who teach them a lot about neurodiversity.

D Ongoing support for students & employees from the partner school.

As the program runs, students work with their campus-based Program Manager or instructor to reinforce and share learning from Mentor and Track Sessions. The same campus point person usually serves as a liaison to employer participants to reinforce their learning about the students themselves and about neurodiversity more broadly.

The 4 Key Components of the Program

NDCE structure.



The timeline shown represents 5 tracks & 5 mentor sessions using the once-per-week model (for 6 total weeks including Week 1 Kickoff & Orientation).

Synchrony and UIUC followed this timeline during the Summer 2023 NDCE Pilot.

sample NDCE timeline.

The NDCE program can be flexible in how schools and companies time its delivery. It can be designed to cover between 5-10 company tracks, accompanied by an equal number of 1:1 mentor sessions. Students can explore 1 track and 1 mentor session per week, or the program may be condensed with track and mentor sessions occurring more frequently.

Program length: 4-10 weeks (based on school-company agreement).

stronger employer- school partnerships.

The NDCE model was built with the goal of strengthening employer-school partnerships around the country, targeting career readiness for ND students and inclusion practices for companies. UConn CNDEI connects employers and schools according to geographic proximity (so students are located where the employer's hiring needs are) and by leveraging existing recruiting relationships.

The resulting partnership delivers a resume-worthy experience that contributes to students' career readiness and creates a structured engagement for employers to connect with ND students (and to learn about neurodiversity in practice).

UConn CNDEI facilitates the creation of these partnerships between employers and colleges by leading and leveraging the 75+ schools in the University Council for Neurodiversity Employment. CNDEI also provides:

- The NDCE structure and playbook as a manual for shared success.
- Training to employees on neurodiversity.
- Additional support to both the employer and the university to ensure the program's success.



key roles & responsibilities 02

step one: create the employer- school connection.



An **ideal university partner** has an established on-campus neurodiversity program. If the school does not yet have a program, consider contacting the disability services office and/or career services center to explore if the school has access to a community of self-identified ND students. Ideal schools are geographically near to the employer's entry-level opportunities so that ND participants can pursue internships and full-time positions with the employer after graduation.

An **ideal employer partner** is eager to increase their knowledge about neurodiversity and has internal support to engage in this innovative recruiting and educational opportunity. Many organizations near the beginning of their journey in this space use the NDCE to improve their ND inclusion efforts.

**Both employers and universities
can enlist UConn CNDEI to identify
potential partners from their
national coalition.**

Employer Roles

Program Manager

Employer-side point person for organization and program administration.

Track Session Leaders

~10 employees/teams who each lead (1) track session.

Mentors

Engage in (6) 1:1 mentorship sessions with students.

Executive Sponsor

Drives momentum and support at the org. level.

University Roles

Program Manager

School-side point person; enlists students, prepares them, & supports them throughout the NDCE.

Student Participants

A cohort of 8-15* neurodivergent university students.

*The number of students can flex depending on the employer's capacity and goals.

Program Intern

A student in an official capacity as a paid intern (by the employer partner) to support both Program Managers.

UConn CNDEI

Program Guidance & Support

Overarching programmatic support, education, and training throughout the NDCE.

UConn CNDEI also includes their strategic partner, instructional design firm **Interrobang**, for design, development, & deployment of employer education & training programs.

overview
of key roles.

program manager role (employer).

The Employer Program Manager handles planning, logistics, scheduling, and communication throughout the NDCE program.

Time Commitment:

1-2 hours/week during planning
~5 hours/week during the program

Employer-side Program Manager responsibilities & tasks:

- Run planning meetings prior to program start
- Schedule pre-program Neurodiversity training sessions for all employer participants with UConn CNDEI
- Coordinate with University Program Director to determine Track Session recurring time slots
- Recruit mentors and track leaders internally
- Hand off mentors to University Program Director for pairing with students
- Communicate pairings to mentees
- Coordinate and design Kickoff/Orientation call in collaboration with University Program Manager
- Coordinate Track Session 'dry runs' or practice sessions and provide feedback
- Host weekly Track Sessions on Teams
- Obtain feedback from the school and the employer - and implement changes accordingly throughout program



program manager role (school).

The University Program Manager typically comes from the department from which the ND students are recruited – the disabilities services office, the ND program, or the career services center.

University-side Program Manager responsibilities & tasks:

- Recruit, communicate with, and organize students in advance of the NDCE program.
- Ideally, during the semester prior to the NDCE, host regular meetings with the students to review expectations, practice using virtual meeting platforms, practice communicating via email, and review goals and objectives
- Coordinate with the Employer Program Manager to determine Track Session recurring time slots.
- Support University Program Manager in the design and facilitation of the Kickoff/Orientation call
- Collaborate with the Employer Program Manager to pair students with mentors, ensure company volunteers' questions are answered about specific students, and to share students' preferred methods of communication

The University Program Manager recruits, organizes and prepares the students for the program, while closely collaborating with the Employer Program Manager on logistics.

Time commitment:
40+ hours in total, spread over 1 semester & the subsequent 1 summer



student intern role (school).

The Student Intern provides critical support to both Program Managers.



A key learning from our NDCE pilot was the benefit of having a college student who is interested in neurodiversity serve as an intern during the spring semester prior to the program. This intern supports the program managers for the school *and* the employer, helping enlist and communicate with the ND students, organize the schedule, and manage the materials. A huge help to everyone! Consider compensation by the employer and/or academic credit, if possible, in exchange for the intern's contribution.

University students studying psychology, education, human development, or those with a personal relationship to the topic of neurodiversity (a sibling, cousin, friend....) make great candidates for this Student Intern role.

“It was an honor to be Synchrony’s Program Manager this summer - what a rewarding role! I loved getting to know the brilliant students and watching them learn and grow more confident each week. Similarly, it was great to witness the mentors and track leaders’ dedication to learning how to communicate and connect with the students.

There was so much learning all around!”

Alex Heinz
Synchrony

Employer Program Manager for 2023 pilot

“I will stress how much maturation I have seen in the students. They really learned a lot. Thanks to all for your time and efforts!”

Dr. Jeanne Kramer
Director of The Autism Program (TAP)
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
University Program Manager for 2023 pilot

the mentor role.

Volunteer employer mentors work 1:1 with students for 45-60 minutes weekly. The meetings focus on applying learning from track rotations, starting an Employment Path Plan for the mentee, and discussing basic workplace skills like email, meetings, interviews, networking, and workplace etiquette. Mentors establish a relationship with their mentee and provide a safe space for students to practice these skills.

Responsibilities & Tasks

- Attend Neurodiversity training and the kickoff & orientation call.
- Schedule weekly 1:1 meetings and provide agendas
- Collaborate with the student mentee to determine which topics will be covered each week

Time Commitment

- (1) 1.5-hour Neurodiversity training
- (1) 1.5-hour kickoff & orientation
- (3 to 4) ½-hour check-in / support calls, every other week
- (4 to 10) 1-hour weekly student meetings

Tips for success in mentoring:

- Email an agenda in advance of each 1:1 meeting so students know what to expect and can prepare.
- Send a reminder to alert students of meetings ahead of time with date, time, location, and (ideally) a way for the student to confirm.
- Ask your mentee about topics they're interested in to help build rapport. Learn what they're interested in both personally and professionally.
- If you are having trouble getting your student to talk: avoid questions that have a lot of possible responses. Instead, ask questions with one right answer (this will take some planning ahead).
- Some ND students prefer high energy in a mentor, and some like more relaxed energy. It is perfectly okay to check in on whether you are providing the right energy level. You might want to ask, "Is there anything about my communication style that I could change to make our calls better for you?"
- ND students (autistics in particular) often don't need social niceties and appreciate honest, frank exchange of information. You can be straightforward with your efforts to serve their needs by asking targeted questions.

the track leader role.

Volunteer leaders from different parts of the business lead the students in group presentations about a variety of entry-level job and career "tracks" within the company. Specifically, track leaders connect the types of skills, interests, daily demands to jobs within a track, with the goal of exposing early-college ND students to real-world tasks and impacts within a segment of the organization, one track at a time. Track leaders may facilitate solo or as a group.

Responsibilities & Tasks

- Attend Neurodiversity training and kickoff & orientation call.
- Each Track Leader builds one engaging Track Session presentation (per guidance provided in training)
- Participate in a practice session with the NDCE Program Manager ~1-2 weeks prior and apply feedback as needed.
- To set clear expectations with the students, provide the agenda in advance, along with any questions that will be asked during the session, to the Program Manager to communicate to students.
- Facilitate a 1.5-hour session with students.

Time Commitment

- (1) 1.5-hour Neurodiversity training
- (1) 1.5-hour kickoff & orientation
- 4-6 hours to prepare content and build track session
- (1) 1.5-hour practice session
- (1) 1.5-hour Track Session with students
- **Total ~12 hours**

Tips for successful tracks:

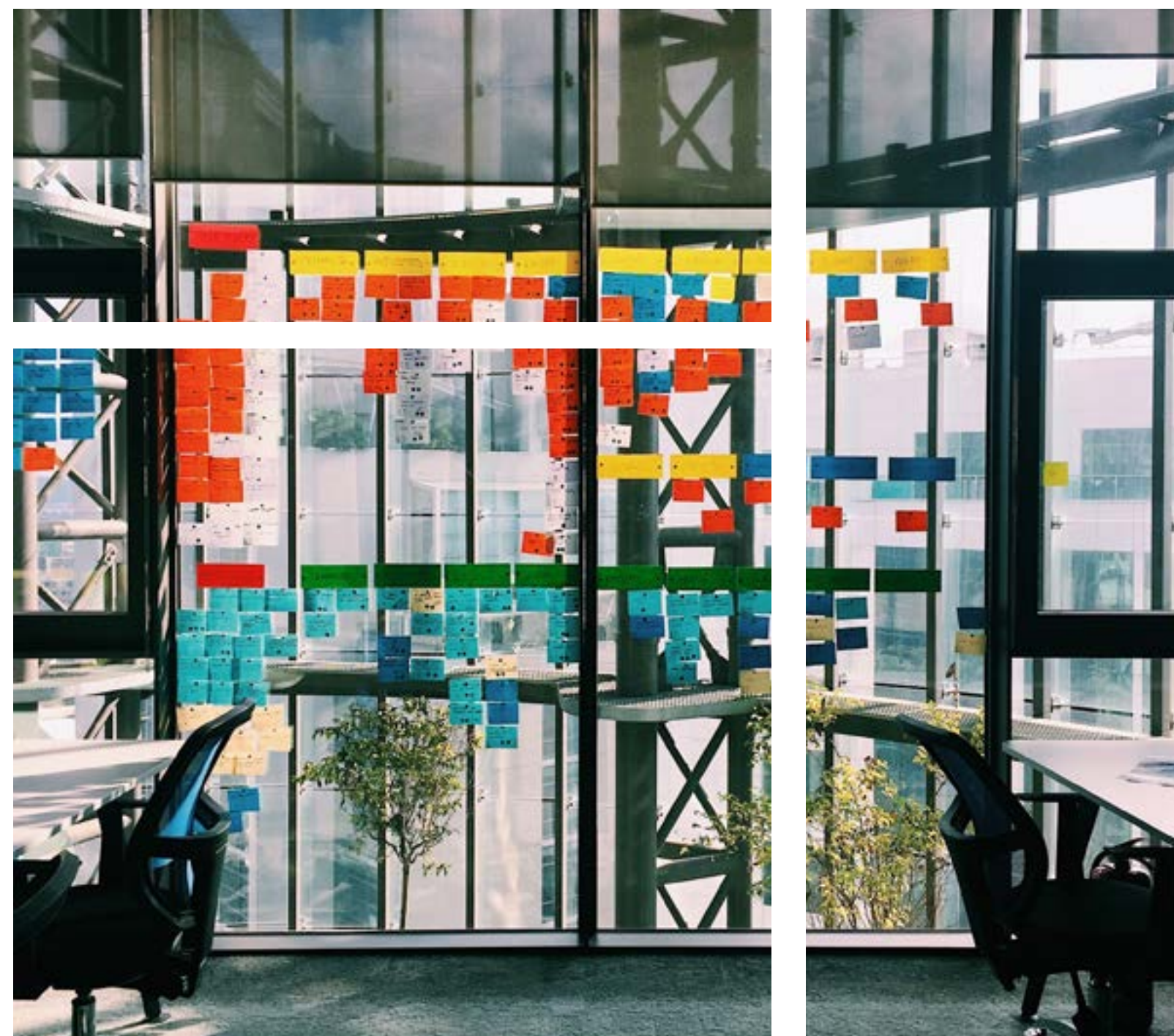
- Use a variety of engagement tools to capture attention (polls, quizzes, chat, trivia, whiteboard, games, etc.).
- Take a 5 minute break halfway through the session.
- Stop screen sharing / sharing content every few slides and engage in conversation. This allows the students to avoid slide overload.
- Don't plan to fill the full 1.5 hours with content. Instead plan for ~45 minutes of content and allow time for reflection, breaks, questions, and conversations.
- Refrain from using acronyms and business jargon—simplify, simplify, simplify!
- Avoid using the phrase "you guys" to address the group- instead use "folks", "group", or "y'all". Gender diversity is especially common within the autistic community.
- Encourage students to leverage closed captioning in Teams or other virtual meeting platforms during sessions if they'd like.
- Observe students' mannerisms and cues - and pivot as needed to keep them engaged.
- Keep it FUN and relatable. Share the great parts of your job!

feedback from mentors.



“The program was an excellent opportunity to help my mentee better understand the job search process and identify his own strengths. I loved getting to know him and helping him to think of things in a new way. He has so much potential and it is my hope that we keep in touch.”

“My biggest takeaway/learning was that you do not need to treat someone with autism like they are made of glass. The more time I spent with my mentee, the more I learned that we just need to adjust our communication to the best fit for the person, but you don't need to be afraid to say certain things. It was a great experience!”



**what track
leaders told us.**

“I took the students’ learning and communication styles into consideration when designing my track session, and I felt that it resonated.

I thought more about story telling rather than explaining.”

“I can appreciate now that neurodivergence is a spectrum, and no matter where someone falls on it they would benefit from clear communication, engaging questions, and patience vs a diagram or rote presentation of the facts. We work with very technical products, and part of our job is to make them as transparent and simple as we can!”

recruiting track leaders & mentors.

Best Practices for Success with Employer Volunteers



Leverage internal employee diversity networks to recruit volunteers.

For example, Synchrony recruited many volunteers from the company's EnAble+ Network, a group focused on creating an accessible and inclusive culture.

Be clear about responsibilities and time commitment for each role.

Recruit volunteers with a variety of roles and backgrounds.

If they have roles that align with the students' interests, even better!



Responsibilities & Tasks

- Semester prior: work with University Program Manager to prepare for the program.
- Attend the Program Kickoff/Orientation call
- Coordinate & participate in weekly 1:1 sessions with their mentor
- Attend all Track Sessions, participating in the activities and asking questions
- Participate in any campus-provided program activities, like meetings & discussions
- Complete any school assignments or reflections related to the program
- Provide feedback to the University Program Manager throughout the experience (i.e. what additional accommodations they could benefit from, what employer participants could be doing to make their experience better, what the employer participants are doing well, etc.)

Summer Time Commitment

- (1) 1.5-hour kickoff & orientation call
- (4 to 10) 1.5-hour Track Sessions
- (4 to 10) 1-hour mentor 1:1 meetings

the student's role.

“I thought the presenters did a good job and made it very engaging for us.”

“I liked meeting with my mentor to fix up my resume - getting it to look better than before.”

My mentor is also open to questions I have and getting me the answer even if they don't know it right then and there.”



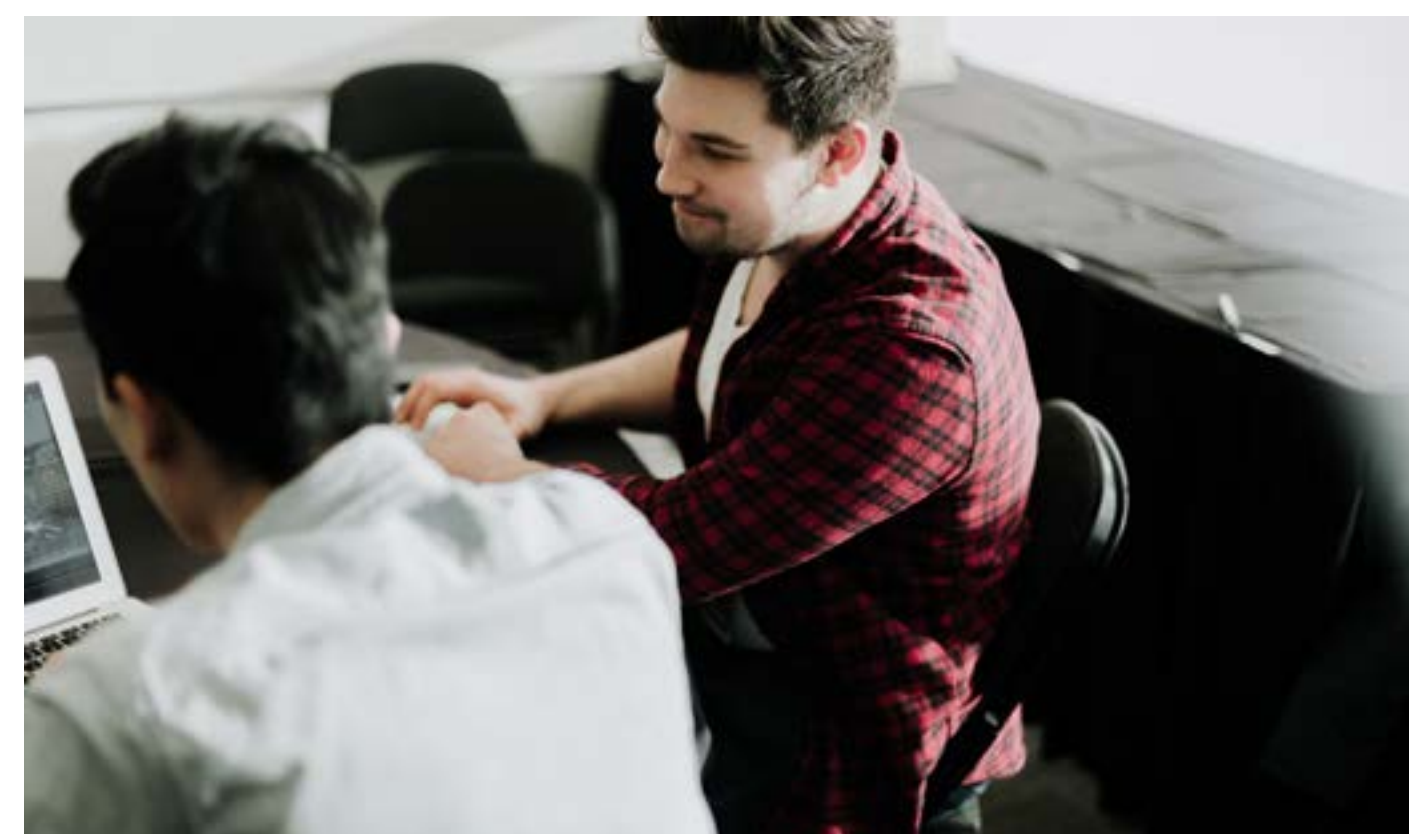
what student participants said.

what student participants said.

“During the track session, I liked how the leader talked about how things in the job match with people’s passions.”

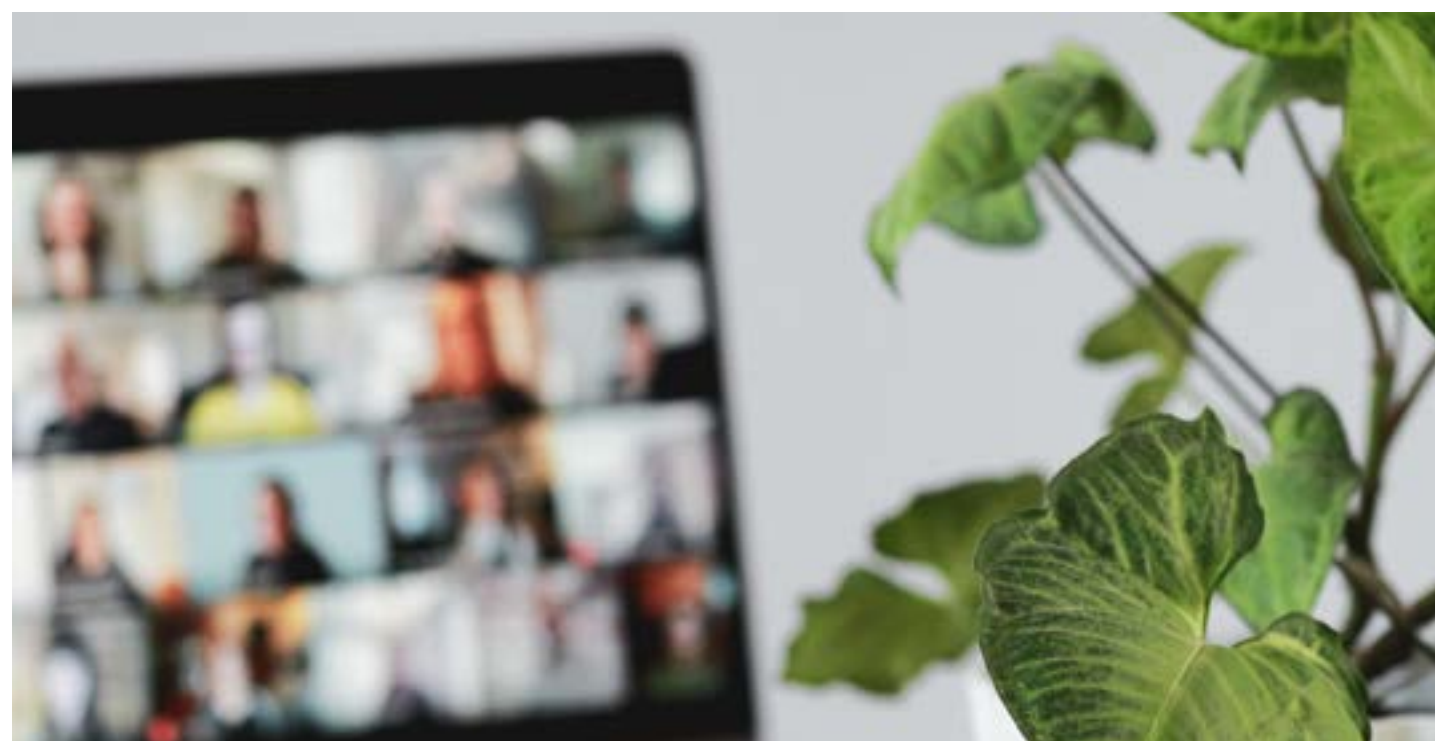
“I liked how much my mentor was willing to share things to help, like establishing my brand to get hired, my resume, and my Linked-In.”

“The leaders really seemed to get us. They knew when we needed a break, and I liked how they turned off the slides a lot so we could relax and just talk.”



prepping participants for success.

Before the program kicks off.



Partner school: meet regularly with students the semester prior.

During the semester prior to the NDCE, the Partner School's Program Manager holds regular meetings with the students to go over the program and expectations of them. They practice using virtual meeting platforms, communicating via email, and preparing goals and objectives for the NDCE experience. This is a great place for support from the Student Intern.

Employer: receive neurodiversity training 1-2 months before the program.

1-2 months prior to the NDCE launch, employer participants engage in a combination of asynchronous independent coursework and live, instructor led coursework to understand neurodiversity, the significance of distinct ND labels or conditions, how neurodiversity shows up within the workplace, and how to use this knowledge to inform their day-to-day actions.

- Mentors receive a *Mentor Session Topics* Document to guide conversations with their student mentee and an email template for initial outreach to their mentee.
- Track Leaders receive a sample PowerPoint template for designing their Track Session. They also schedule at least one rehearsal run through with the Employer Program Manager.
- One learning from the Summer 2023 Pilot: Employer participants could have benefited from observing demo Track Sessions and demo Mentor Sessions (role play live, or recorded).

Partner school + employer: hold a kickoff / orientation with all participants.

To launch the NDCE, participants engage in a kickoff session in which everyone - students, track leaders, mentors, Program Managers, and support teams - connects to meet each other, align on program objectives, set expectations... and set the stage for an exciting program!

Employer: Synchrony

Executive Sponsor

Josh Crafford, VP of Learning & Development

Program Manager

Alex Heinz, Training Coordinator

Track Session Leaders

Fay Li & James Ringland (Credit Innovation)

James Hill & Joshua Maldonado (Marketing)

Alex Ruiz (Cybersecurity)

Anthony Fennell & Siva Chandran

(Mobile Software Dev)

Liza Palumbo, Ken Cross, & Jeremy Mack

(Metaverse, Blockchain, AI)

Mentors

Jaclyn Martinelli, Social Media Analyst

Jim Nikolai, VP, State Government Affairs

Brittany Nurnberger, Digital Product Manager

Amy Balchius, Recruiting Coordinator

Bianca Diehl, Recruiter

Austin Heisey, API Software Dev Engineer

Jonathan Rodriguez, VP of HR, TechOps

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

University Program Manager

Dr. Jeanne Kramer, Director of the Autism Program

Program Intern

No intern was included in this pilot program; one key learning was the need for additional administrative support, both during the program and in the semester prior.

Students

Anna, Astronomy Major

Student Participant, Business Major

Cameron Anderson, Aeronautical Engineering Major

Student Participant, Mechanical Engineering Major

Grace, Plant Biology Major

John, Computer Science &

Biochemical Engineering Major

Liam, History Major

UConn CNDEI

NDCE Director

Judy Reilly, UConn CNDEI Executive Director

Program Trainer & Consultant

Luke Jordan, Executive Director, Interrobang

summer 2023 pilot program.

how **everyone** wins. 03

how every ND student wins.

ND learners often benefit when information is presented in different, more concrete ways. Best practices include breaking abstract concepts into more specific examples; applying a lesson to multiple scenarios; and creating additional structure to the learning environment. Information is better understood when shared in multiple ways and modalities, especially through hands-on experience.

The NDCE addresses those needs by using actual, early-career jobs in a specific organization to deliver lessons about the workplace and roles. The program helps students map that practical workplace specificity to their majors, skills, and interests, describing the everyday tasks and activities in that type of job. More, working with guidance from a mentor, students can develop an action plan for their own career development based on what they're learning in the program.

2 ways students improve career readiness:

1 Track Sessions
Employers identify 5-6 entry level roles that their organization hires for at the early career level. Employee Track Leaders each highlight one of those roles for discussion at each Track Session. They utilize descriptions, demos, and activities to help students really understand the role(s) and whether their skills and interests align.

Learning Outcomes:

- Understand how different college majors could map to and prepare candidates for the different tracks that are part of the program.
- Learn about different entry-level jobs on a more concrete level.
 - What does someone do in that job each day?*
 - Where does that job lead?*
 - What is the typical work environment for a job like that?*
- Gain confidence interacting and communicating with employers in real time.
- Develop consistency and competence in checking and managing email communications.
- Build skills and experience using virtual meeting platforms.

2 Mentorship Sessions
Each student in the program works with a volunteer employee in the company to explore job search activities and to learn more about workplace expectations.

Learning Outcomes:

- Identify possible next steps in career development for the upcoming school year.
- Experience and practice with workplace skills like email communication, virtual meetings, interviewing, and resume writing.
- Gain confidence in networking and with corporate etiquette.

Increasingly, companies are eager to better include neurodivergent individuals with differences like autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and more. Operationalizing that goal, however, often proves complicated.

The NDCE is an opportunity for employers to learn about neurodiversity 1) by working directly with ND individuals in a hands-on manner, and 2) through targeted training from UConn's CNDEI as part of the program.

how the employer wins.

3 ways employers improve their neurodiversity knowledge:

1

Neurodiversity Training from UConn CNDEI: an impactful educational experience to all employees participating in the NDCE prior to the program launch.

Learning Outcomes:

- Understand what neurodiversity really means and how it might show up in employment.
- Gain clarity about the inclusion of everyone, specifically highlighting what to know and do differently to account for neurodivergent considerations .
- Learn how to apply this knowledge to the employee's role in the NDCE program as a Mentor or Track Leader.

2

Delivering Track Sessions to students: In 5-6 different business areas with early-career roles, selected employees lead a presentation and discussion with the students about that area of the business.

Learning Outcomes:

- These selected team members learn how to communicate effectively with ND individuals, shifting the ways they share information and engage.
- Gain experience and confidence interacting with ND students and team members.
- Practice interpreting and engaging with unique communication styles.
- Enjoy a meaningful experience with a new community of students.

3

Offering Mentorship to students: Within the program, an employee mentor meets weekly with each student to reinforce the learning from the track sessions, teach job search skills, and review workplace expectations.

Learning Outcomes:

- The mentors learn how to effectively communicate and guide ND employees.
- Gain experience and confidence interacting with ND students and team members.
- Practice interpreting and engaging with different communication and work styles.
- Enjoy a meaningful experience with a new community of students.



Benefits for employers.

The NDCE is a great way for companies to improve their **competence and confidence** regarding neurodiversity. It drives them to better understand and value neurodiversity in their organization.

This experience better positions them to implement practices & changes in **interviewing, hiring, supporting, and retaining** employees based on neurodiverse considerations.

**connect with us
at UConn CNDEI.**

For all inquiries, please contact:

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