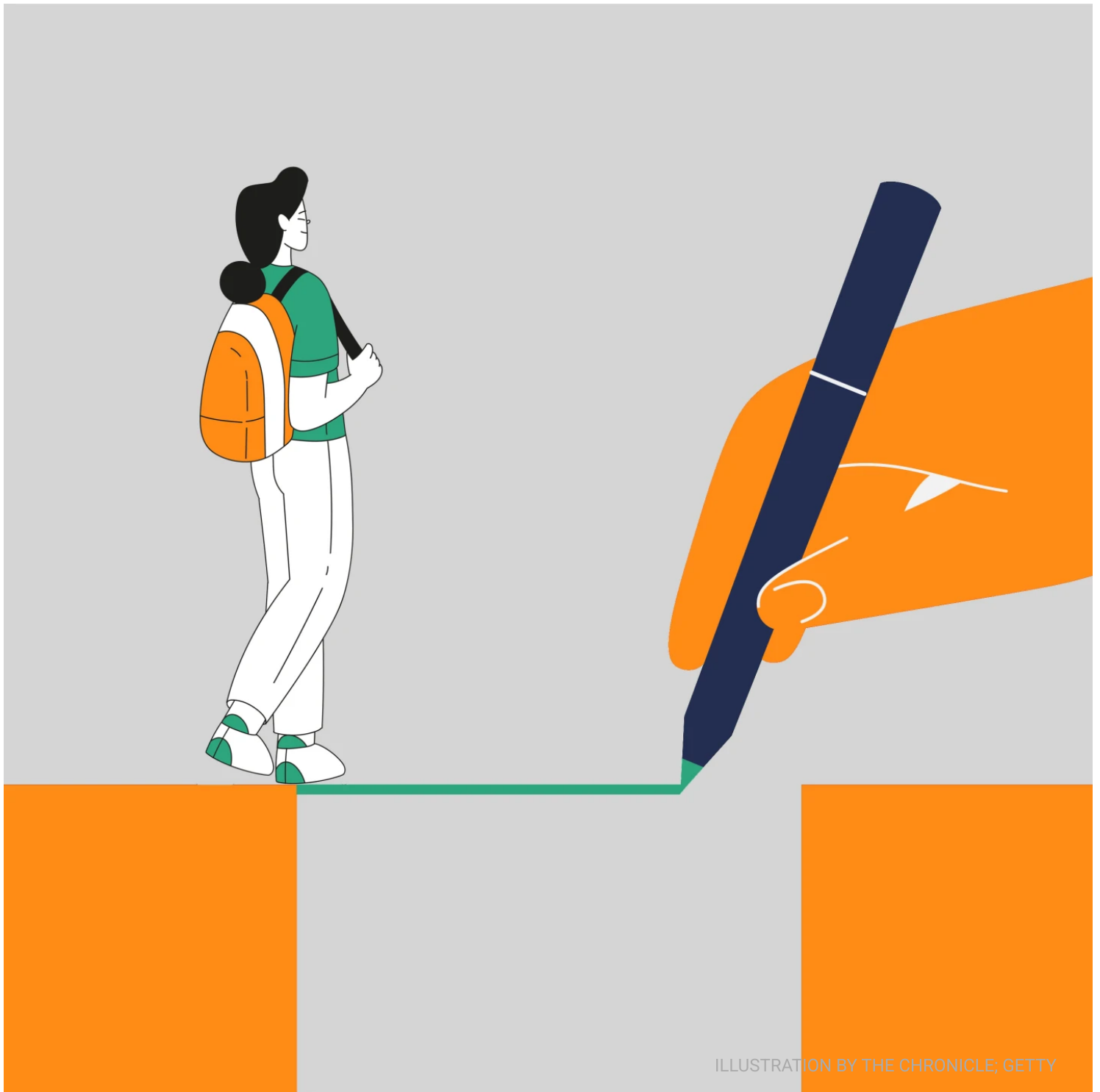




The Neurodiversity Playbook: How One Tiny College Is Teaching Others to Adapt

As the number of students asking for accommodations soars, Landmark College is offering teaching tips and expert insights.



STRATEGIES & SKILLS



By [Katherine Mangan](#)

August 4, 2026

A few years ago, Nickole Milo began noticing a pattern at River Valley Community College: Each semester, more students were showing up to her accessibility office asking for academic accommodations, mostly for anxiety, attention-deficit disorder, and autism. The number of students approved for modifications like extra time on tests and assignments tripled in three years.

Faculty members were willing to be flexible in how they assigned and graded students' work, but they still had to meet the rigorous standards set by accreditors.

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As an academic adviser and accessibility-services coordinator at the open-access New Hampshire college, “I knew we could do better” at striking that balance, Milo said, “but we needed support.”

River Valley, which has struggled to maintain its own enrollment of fewer than 700 full-time students, found help in another tiny college across the Vermont border, one that’s designed exclusively for students with learning disabilities and conditions like ADHD and anxiety.

[Landmark College](#), founded in 1985, has about 420 students living on its rural campus in the foothills of the Green Mountains. But its reach extends much farther through the growing number of workshops, consulting arrangements, summer institutes, and a certification program it offers to educators from around the country.

“Half of our mission is about serving other colleges and universities as well as K-12 institutions, teaching them the strategies and skills to make the classroom experience more accessible for all students,” said Adam R. Lalor, vice president for neurodiversity research and innovation at Landmark.

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Interest in these sessions has grown steadily, he said. With enrollments falling and many students struggling academically, colleges are seeking new ways to help their most vulnerable students, including those with disabilities, succeed.

The sheer numbers, though, can seem overwhelming. The proportion of college students with registered disabilities grew from 11 percent in 2004 to 21 percent in 2020, according to the [U.S. Government Accountability Office’s most recent figures](#). Behavioral or emotional conditions, including depression and ADHD, made up 69 percent of the disability cases in 2020. That’s more than double their share in 2004.

Colleges that have turned to Landmark reported numerous challenges. At River Valley, students who’d done poorly in high school and hadn’t had accommodations questioned whether they were cut out for college, Milo said. Faculty members weren’t sure how to meet students’ diverse needs while maintaining high standards, and sometimes chafed at the extra work that arranging alternate testing conditions created.

When training is available, it isn’t always extended to adjuncts, who make up a growing share of faculty members.

Elsewhere, small disability offices with high turnover rates struggle to convince administrators that additional investment in disability services is worthwhile, Lalor said.

“There’s a much greater awareness of disability and the need for accommodations today, but at the same time, [increased pushback](#),” Lalor said.

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In 2019, as part of the sweeping scandal known as Operation Varsity Blues, *The New York Times* [reported](#) that students in wealthy districts were paying thousands of dollars for disability diagnoses that gave them extra time on standardized college-entrance tests.

“[Varsity Blues](#) put the issue of accommodations at the forefront but also in the crosshairs of higher education,” Lalor said. “A few bad apples unfortunately ruined many people’s perceptions of what the basket contained.”

Those perceptions were reinforced by more recent [media reports](#) questioning the reasons behind the surge in the proportion of college students with registered disabilities, especially at selective colleges.

The growth presents both challenges and opportunities for Landmark. Some worry it feeds stereotypes that those in the disability field have [struggled for decades to dispel](#), that students with emotional disabilities are simply lazy or unmotivated. But it also creates a demand for better understanding of neurodiversity and a college’s responsibilities to adapt to it, Lalor pointed out. Colleges that, in the past, were mainly worried about complying with federal antidiscrimination laws are, in many cases, now fundamentally rethinking how they teach.

The growth in interest is reflected in Landmark's [Institute for Research and Training](#), which works with about 40 colleges annually. Lalor, who leads the institute, used to handle most of the workshops himself, but it now has a director, three full-time professional-development trainers, two researchers, and support staff.

Among the efforts the research group oversees is the [Summer Institute for Educators](#), [which](#) has grown from 86 to 114 outside educators over the past decade. The summer session, which several River Valley employees attended, is an annual three-day gathering for K-12 school and college educators to explore new techniques to help neurodivergent learners overcome academic and social challenges.

Enrollment in Landmark's graduate-level [certificate program](#) in learning differences and neurodiversity has quadrupled since 2018, to 481. The online postbaccalaureate program is designed for educators, disability staff, and other professionals.

Given the additional staff Landmark hired to expand its consulting and education programs, it doesn't see the programs as big moneymakers, according to Dan Buryj, its chief financial officer.

It does see room for further growth, including in its [training sessions for corporations](#) looking to support neurodivergent workers.

Excluding the certificate-program tuition, Landmark's consulting and education programs, combined, bring in about \$331,000 each year — a “small portion of a \$38-million budget,” Buryj said.

Still, the programs bring national recognition and a financial buffer to the small private college at a time when it isn't counting on any significant enrollment increases.

Landmark customizes its professional development to provide classroom strategies to overwhelmed faculty members, documentation requirements to harried disability-services officers, and furnishing advice to campus planners.

The workshops at River Valley unpacked the science behind neurodiversity and the specific challenges of students with autism. Faculty members learned how to respond when an autistic student demonstrates stimming behaviors like rocking back and forth or humming. The student might need a five-minute break to walk around the building, or the relief might be found in the classroom, they were told.

In one workshop, a Landmark presenter passed around a basket of stress balls, squishy toys, and fidget spinners to give participants an idea of how an autistic or any anxious student might find the items soothing during a challenging lecture or study session. They proved so popular that River Valley now offers faculty members “calming kits” to keep in their classrooms.

River Valley faculty and staff also learned strategies for removing learning barriers facing all students — a concept referred to as universal design for learning. And Morgan Sailer, a career adviser, came away with helpful tips for bolstering students’ confidence in job interviews and skills in drafting résumés.

In one universal-design course Landmark offers, each student participates in class discussions from the perspective of a student with a particular set of learning challenges and strengths. Another course focuses on legal compliance and interpreting diagnostic documents to determine whether accommodations are needed and which are most appropriate.

One of Landmark’s most popular workshop topics involves “executive function,” a catchall for cognitive processes involved in organization, motivation, time management, and avoiding distractions. People with ADHD can be particularly shaky in these areas, Landmark trainers say, and could benefit from breaking down large, complex projects into a dozen bite-size pieces that are clearly plotted out before becoming overwhelmed.

Marist University, a Poughkeepsie, N.Y., institution where a quarter of the students have a registered disability, has offered Landmark workshops to its staff for three years, said Maryellen Guardino, the university’s director of accommodations and accessibility.

“They’re the pioneers and experts in the field,” said Guardino, a former school psychologist and special-education teacher. Since the university has started working with Landmark, she said, faculty members are offering more group projects and alternative ways for students to demonstrate their knowledge. By recording lectures, uploading notes, and setting clear goals and expectations for a class, faculty may be able to minimize the number of students needing individual accommodations, Guardino said.

“If, for an assessment, you assign an essay and give the whole class a week to complete it, you don’t have to worry about giving some students time and a half for a test,” she pointed out.

Of course, that opens up the risk that students will get artificial intelligence to write it for them. But perhaps AI could offer some benefits to autistic students, Lalor suggested, “by taking ideas that are more complex than most of us understand, putting the writing in layman’s terms, and making the tone seem less argumentative.”

Modifying an assignment might allow a student who communicates or learns differently to demonstrate that they’ve mastered the material. Flexibility, though, can only go so far. “Accommodations were never intended to circumvent standard learning objectives that require you to do something in a certain amount of time,” Lalor said. One striking example might be a medical trainee learning a lifesaving technique. “You can’t fail to resuscitate someone because you need more time.”

But sometimes, he argued, the steps students are required to go through are unrelated to the learning objectives and, in fact, might make it harder to show they’ve mastered them. For instance, a math professor might require students to write a paragraph describing how they solved an equation. For someone who struggles with spelling or writing, the extra steps are taxing and do nothing to demonstrate the skills the math professor is testing them on, he said.

“You’re asking them to spell and write when you really need them to solve the equation.”

An approach that emphasizes universal design would allow students to demonstrate their knowledge using the tools they're most comfortable with, whether it's a paper, a video presentation, or a one-on-one conversation with the professor. It would also help ensure that colleges are meeting the needs of the many students with hidden disabilities who don't register for accommodations. A recent [study](#) published in a psychology journal found that only one in three college students with ADHD register for accommodations.

Such individualized assessment can be time-consuming and probably unrealistic for faculty members in large lecture classes. But Lalor said many faculty members, with or without training in universal design, are varying their testing methods and formats for written assignments to accommodate different learning styles.

It's clear that students with attention-deficit disorder aren't the only ones who struggle to turn in assignments on time and focus on a long text. It doesn't take a diagnosis of anxiety to make a student break out in a sweat or feel faint during an exam. While many students do need special accommodations, advocates of universal design say, time-management workshops and stress-relieving tips and toys can help all students. So, too, can classrooms designed with flexible seating options and softer lighting.

Last year, Lalor and a colleague spent two days at Lansing Community College, in Michigan, performing a [neurodiversity audit](#), which Lansing touted as a way to show it was "autism friendly." Such assessments are helpful, Landmark's report states, at a time when growing numbers of autistic students are enrolling in college and "encountering social isolation, mental-health challenges, and difficulties navigating unstructured academic environments."

The audit included focus groups with faculty, staff, students, senior leaders, and community members, as well as surveys and a close look at physical spaces. Among the recommendations to help students who are feeling overstimulated and uncomfortable: calming spaces, sound reduction, and weighted blankets. The audit also recommended more staff and faculty training and peer-support programs.

Many of the recommendations came directly from the students. As one Lansing student told the Landmark visitors: “Just reaching out ... and listening to their feedback is the best thing you could do.”

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Katherine Mangan

Katherine Mangan writes about campus diversity, student activism, government efforts to shape higher education, and how colleges are responding and sometimes resisting. Follow her [@KatherineMangan](#), or email her at katie.mangan@chronicle.com

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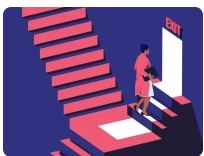
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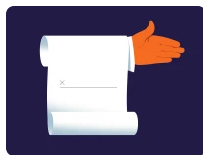
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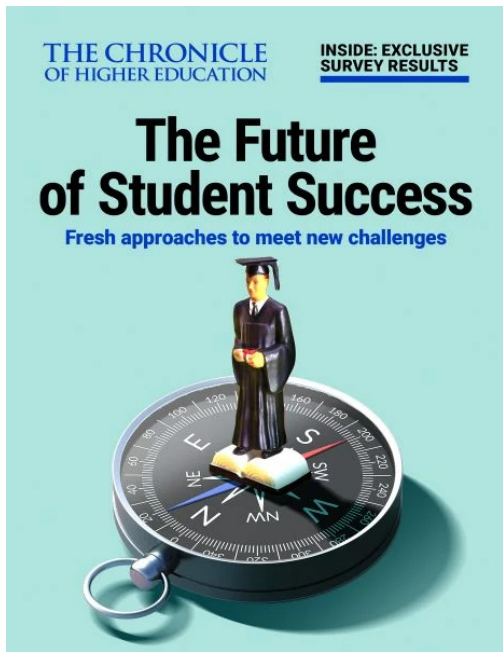


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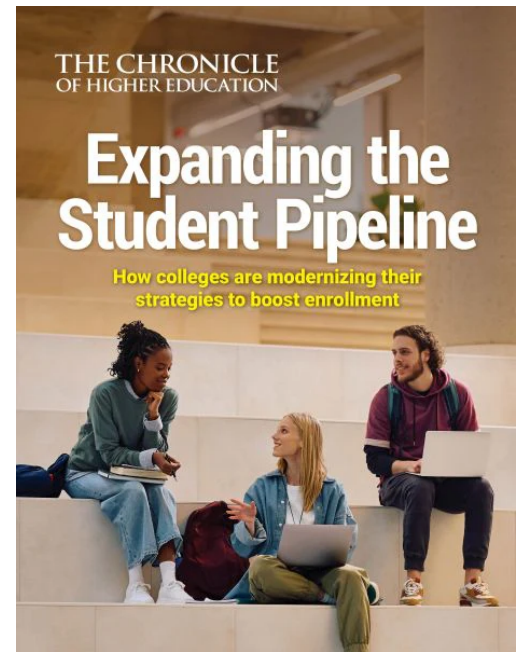


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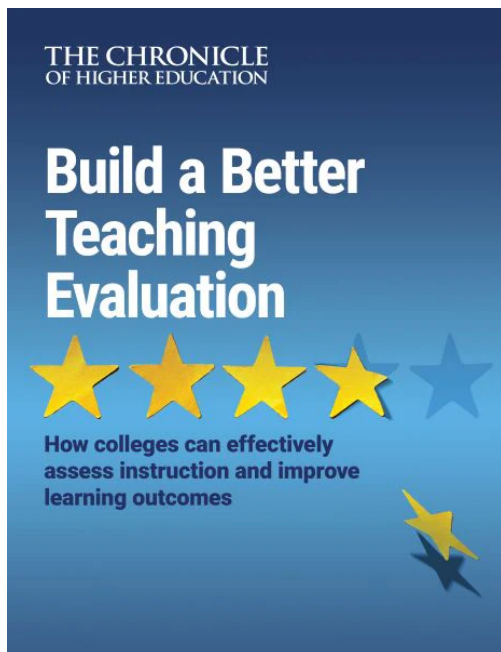
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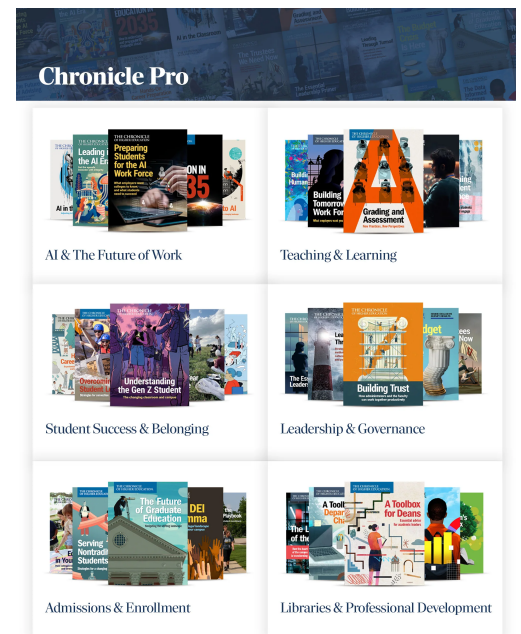
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