Title: Rethinking the “Typical” Student: Strategies for Every Kind of Mind

Speaker: Vanessa Rainey, University of West Florida

Abstract:

College classrooms are not neutral spaces. They are sensory environments, rich with sights, sounds, textures, and social signals. For neurodiverse students, including those with autism and ADHD, these environments can either empower students or quietly erode focus and well-being, often without the student realizing it.

Drawing from research on sensory processing, this talk invites instructors to step into the classroom through a sensory lens. We’ll examine what it means to be hypo- versus hyper-sensitive in a college classroom. We’ll explore how lighting, acoustics, movement, and even the feel of furniture can shape learning outcomes. Together, we’ll consider small but powerful changes that reduce barriers, enhance engagement, and create more inclusive learning spaces; not only for neurodiverse students, but for every learner in the room.

Bio:

Vanessa Rainey is an Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of West Florida, with a Ph.D. in developmental psychology from Loyola University Chicago. Her research explores sensory processing in neurodiverse populations and how it shapes success in academic and workplace settings. In recent years, her work has turned toward designing inclusive learning environments in college that address sensory processing needs for all students- a time often overlooked once more comprehensive school support systems end.

In addition to her research, Dr. Rainey is dedicated to advancing teaching and learning. She has published in teaching journals, delivered workshops at numerous teaching conferences, and is currently developing a new edition of a lifespan development textbook. Recognized with multiple teaching awards at her university, Dr. Rainey has used these opportunities to launch high-impact classroom projects. Through both scholarship and instruction, Dr. Rainey continues to bridge research and practice in meaningful ways for every learner.