The ACTIVATE Program
Our goal is to create a program where our neurodiverse students belong, have a space to build their own identity and network of community, and feel they have pride in themselves and their diversity.

**1 TO 1 COACHING**
Weekly meetings with an ASO staff member provides students a point person for questions & help in navigating the nuances of college life.

**ACTIVATE MENTORS**
Paid positions are offered to returning Activate students to mentor new Activate students, providing a rich, welcoming, and safe first-job experience.

**GWNN GROUP**
GWNN, a self-named student group, meets weekly to play board games and socialize as a group to foster belonging and relationships amongst members.

**LUNCH TABLE**
To help tackle the challenge of where to sit in the cafeteria, an Activate Mentor hosts a designated lunch table in the Sak each day of the week.

**SNACKS & CHATS**
ASO staff + Activate mentor hold weekly discussions around college transition subjects like time management or communication with peers and faculty.

**A PLACE FOR CONNECTION**

**AUTISM AS NEURODIVERSITY**

"If you have met one person on the autism spectrum, you have met one person on the autism spectrum." This is a wonderful saying that captures the array or spectrum of our students. Autism is more like a trend of similarities noticed in the world’s neurodiversity than a fixed set of features. Given certain environments or situations, an individual on the autism spectrum may exhibit a variety of behaviors. However, there is such a vast array of how this plays out in someone’s life.

Thus, a program for autistic students must be dynamic and adaptive, involving the students themselves in the development process and must grow to support the students’ changing needs. And as it is a loose trend, some students without an autism diagnosis but who may exhibit similar behaviors may also benefit from Activate.
Our goal is to create a program where our neurodiverse students belong, have a space to build their own identity and network of community, and feel they have pride in themselves and their diversity.

**1 TO 1 COACHING**
Weekly meetings with an ASO staff member provides students a point person for questions & help in navigating the nuances of college life.

Every person’s transition to college is different and filled with it's individual hurdles and victories. While there may be similarities amongst group members, there are a lot of nuances in each student's transition experience. For this reason, we offer weekly meetings to Activate students in order to tailor conversations and the focus to meet the student where they most need it. Some topics that may be covered in more depth in a weekly meeting include:

- Navigating the social landscape of college
- Battling loneliness or a lack of a sense of belonging
- Working through the stigma around autism (or something related to autism)
- Classroom expectations
- Living on campus and the residential experience
- Maintaining mental health wellness
- Appropriate conversations with faculty and peers
- Advocating for oneself (some for the first time)
- Working through time management and study skills
- Assistance securing campus and off campus work, internships and career exploration
- Developing resilience and grit
THE ACTIVATE PROGRAM
Accessibility Services Office

ACTIVATE MENTORS
Paid positions are offered to returning Activate students to mentor new Activate students, providing a rich, welcoming, and safe first-job experience.

Across the country, and at Merrimack, autistic students are leaving college with little to nothing on their résumés. This makes it very challenging for these students to get a job later on. To combat what some refer to as the "Empty Résumé Syndrome," Activate has built in opportunities for designated paid mentorship positions, which can be a good first step into the job world.

Jobs are filled with new experiences, and all of that change and unfamiliarity can be intimidating. The Activate Mentorship positions are offered only to students in the Activate program and provide a safe and welcoming first-job experience. The student is supervised by an ASO staff member or identified and supported professional and will meet weekly to discuss important job readiness skills, work communication and understanding expectations, time management skills in a work environment.

The added benefit of this position is for the new Activate members to have a peer to turn to and learn from.

A PLACE FOR CONNECTION
Our goal is to create a program where our neurodiverse students belong, have a space to build their own identity and network of community, and feel they have pride in themselves and their diversity.
THE ACTIVATE PROGRAM
Accessibility Services Office

GWNN GROUP
GWNN, a self-named student group, meets weekly to play board games and build community as a group to foster belonging and relationships amongst members.

To further connections and relationships, GWNN is a key part of the Activate program. Each Tuesday, Activate students gather as a group to catch up and play various board games. The group makes a collective decision on the game(s), thus promoting skills like compromising, flexibility, and communicating. In addition to these group meetings, there are four off-campus dinners throughout the semester at the end of each month. There are also off-campus weekend events with GWNN. The group is led by an Activate Mentor and an ASO staff member.

About Our Name:
The students named the group GWNN (pronounced "gwyn"), which stands for Group With No Name. As some students in the group carry stigma around autism, they wanted the group name to be unrelated to any specific diagnosis or label. With such an ambiguous name, whether a sign is posted, group sweatshirts or merchandise are given, or someone asks about the group, nothing in the group name would specifically connect any given group member with autism.

A PLACE FOR CONNECTION
Our goal is to create a program where our neurodiverse students belong, have a space to build their own identity and network of community, and feel they have pride in themselves and their diversity.
LUNCH TABLE
To help tackle the challenging dilemma of where to sit in the cafeteria, an Activate Mentor hosts a designated lunch table in the Sakowich Center each day of the week.

Just like their peers, Activate students also look for deep social connections and their place at Merrimack. Some stressors in the college environment can inhibit students from reaching their full potential and can lead to disconnection. One potential stressor is navigating the dining hall. Students often express that going to eat in the cafeteria is stressful - they don't know where to sit or who to sit with, and they end up getting food and leaving.

In order to help ease this transition for students and provide leadership opportunities to upperclass students, one Activate Mentor will sit at a designated table in the cafeteria each day of the week during lunch time. The specific Mentor will fluctuate each day, but this ensures that if a student was looking for a place to sit, someone to connect with or ask a question to, they could go to this spot and spend time with one of the Activate Mentors.
Our goal is to create a program where our neurodiverse students belong, have a space to build their own identity and network of community, and feel they have pride in themselves and their diversity.

A PLACE FOR CONNECTION

SNACKS & CHATS
ASO staff and an Activate mentor hold weekly discussions around college transition subjects like time management or communication with peers and faculty.

The GWNN group is focused on belonging and connection, where students can hangout with one another in a relaxed environment. Alongside this, there is a need for conversations around college life in both academic and social realms to assist in both the transition to and persistence through college. Over snacks, these conversations would be held regularly. The Snacks & Chats is led by an ASO staff member and Active Mentor. Current GWNN students listed the following topics as being important for them and ones they would like discussed:

- Understanding the unsaid rules of the classroom
- Developing time management skills
- Socializing with peers
- Location of services and knowing what staff are available
- Balancing work and relaxation
- Communicating with faculty and group projects

THE ACTIVATE PROGRAM
Accessibility Services Office
THE ACTIVATE PROGRAM
Accessibility Services Office

EXPANSION IDEAS
In 2018-2019, we conducted weekly outreach to 46 students who identified on their intake form as autistic or related. In the spring, 9 students attended the group (2 sophomores and 7 first-year students). All current students plan to continue in 2019-2020.

Most of our students are first year students as our primary contact is with those class years. As the college becomes more neurodiverse, we expect the supports to expand accordingly. We expect the students' bond to these supports to continue throughout their time at Merrimack and even beyond.

Some ideas for directions for growth include:
- Alumni connections and support
- Vocational opportunities and partnership with the O'Brien Center for Career Development
- Living Learning Community
- FYE specific sections
- Summer Transition Institute